

スレイヤーズ

14

セレンティアの憎悪

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神坂一



ファンタジア文庫

Slayers

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A Power Struggle in the Human World, With No End to its Cause

“When the sun sets, demons will appear–” I said. As if I was singing. The light was stained orange, and the night tainted black, mixing in the townscape we looked upon. “I heard a story like that somewhere before. Certainly, in the orange-stained world, hiding between the light and dark, somewhere where the eyes can’t see, demons are hiding–creeping through the gaps in my heart, slowly driving me mad. That’s the kind of feeling I get.”

“So in other words...” my traveling companion, Gourry, said, looking out at the same scene. He was a handsome, unmistakably ultra-first class, swordsman. Regrettably, instead of brains, his head was stuffed with soggy pasta. His long blond hair, with the wind and the sunset, glowed like a wavering flame. “We lost the road because of the dusk, but aren’t you kind of at fault for spontaneously going through the back alleys?”

“.....”

“.....”

It was silent. The only sound was the moaning of the wind.

“Daaahhhh! It’s my fault! Everything is all my fault!” I couldn’t help it. I had honestly made a mistake.

In the territory of the Ralteague Empire, Sellentia City, also known as the city of temples. On the prosperous ground

of the Flare Dragon Ceiphied faith, there are five large temples. I've heard it told that among the devout, there are those who come here solely to make a pilgrimage. The two of us, while wandering aimlessly in our travels, happened to be in the area, and for some reason or another decided to stop by. When we came to this city the sun was still high in the sky...

"But Gourry!" I raised my index finger while talking to him. "spontaneously' isn't the appropriate word for it! My heart is stimulated by my appreciation for good taste, and when I'm in a downtown area devoid of entertainment, in order to fully enjoy the simple and quiet atmosphere, my body surrenders itself to my feet!"

"Uhhh..." Gourry thought for a bit. "Didn't you say 'we should go there for some reason or another'? Isn't that spontaneous?"

-gh! Crap! For the battle-hardened genius sorceress, the great Lina Inverse, my special move against normal people is my 'Purposefully Speak in Roundabout Ways to Cause Confusion Attack" but when I'm against Gourry's simple brain, it won't work!

"K-! You did it Gourry!"

"...what's that?" He said to me nonchalantly, without knowing my innermost strategy. I flipped my cape.

"Phew. Right here, I will quietly admit my defeat. ...I know. If I use a levitation spell, I can see where the road goes from

the sky.” I began chanting a spell in my mouth. But I was suddenly interrupted.

“Lina.”

“I know.” I answered Gourry. There, from out in the street it flowed on the breeze. A sound like hard objects clashing- in other words, weapons. Someone was fighting. Of course I didn’t plan on sticking my neck into it.

“For now it’s be best if we got away from here, okay?”

“yeah...”

we nodded to each other, then turned so that the sound was at our backs.

“It stopped.” Gourry murmured again. The sounds of weapons had disappeared. So then, the fight was over? Or so I thought.

KABOOM!!

Instantly the wall of a nearby home was blown apart! Wha-?! Debris fluttered around in a cloud of dust. The two of us jumped back and somehow avoided being hit with any shrapnel. Was that- an attack spell?! Within the cloud of dust bathed in the orange of sunset- there was a presence.

“Who was that?! Was it you bastards?!” From there I heard a man’s voice. Slowly and quietly, two shadows emerged from within the dust. The first one carried a long sword in one hand; a warrior clad in light mail. And the other one- His entire body was completely wrapped in black clothes. Even

his face, except for the portion where his eyes were, was concealed by black cloth. -Typical Assassin style. In his hand was a large dagger. Were these the two that were fighting? The voice had come from the one that looked like a warrior.



“A sorceress and a warrior... who are you working for?!”
The warrior questioned us a second time. Wait... did he say... working for?

“We were just passing by.”

“.....”

In response to my honesty, the warrior was silent for a while.

"I see... You're not stupid enough to tell the truth. In which case..." He said as if he understood.

No, I was telling the truth... looks like it's useless trying to talk to them... The assassin was standing there silently. And suddenly without even a blur of motion, he kicked the earth and made a big jump! But it wasn't toward us, it was backwards. Since he assumed the two of us were enemies, either he didn't like three way fights, or in an unrelated decision he chose to retreat because we weren't worth causing an uproar over. I just didn't know which one it was.

The assassin type took cover in his new position, and immediately his presence vanished.

"...hm..." The warrior type sneered in the direction of where the assassin had disappeared from. "Looks like he realized he was no match for me and ran away... as for the rest of you..."

Eek! He glared right at us.

"You bastards!"

Hey now...

"I don't know who hired you, but listen here! If you get out of town right now, I'll overlook what happened here! Got that?!!"

“Wh... But... Isn’t this all just a misunderstanding?” Gourry said as he itched at his cheek. The man raised an eyebrow.

“Misunderstanding? I get it... since it’s two against one, you have the advantage! You have no reason to say something like that! Unlesssss...!”

“Dug Wave.”

BOOM!

“Aieeeee!!”

With just one spell, I blasted him away. Ugh, that was irritating.

“Hey, Gourry... For that kind of opponent, you don’t need to act decently. It’s just a waste of time.”

“No... that’s not... Anyway, what was that just now?”

In response to his question I answered, “Well... I really don’t know... But I can say one thing for sure– Somehow, once again, something troublesome is giving us a warm welcome.”

“...Is that so? ...So that’s what I saw...” the elderly Chief Counselor said with a sigh, after listening to my story. He didn’t seem shocked at all.

The next day at dawn we had come to the Sellentia City Sorcerer’s Guild. Stopping by at the guild, we greeted the Chief Counselor and told him about the fight we witnessed yesterday– and that was the response he gave us.

“Y-you knew?!” At my question, the white haired, white bearded Chief Counselor nodded with a bitter expression.

“You do know that this city is known as the city of temples right?”

“Yes... I’ve heard that...”

“So then, did you hear about the fire that burned down the center temple two months ago?”

“...This is the first I’ve heard of that.”

“Well... that was when it all started...” The chief counselor began his long-winded tale...

Here in Sellentia city there are many temples, but there is primarily only one temple divided into parts. At the center of the city is the main temple, where Flare Dragon Ceiphied is enshrined. Then in the east, west, south, and north, there are four branches of the main temple where the four Dragon Lords are enshrined. Through the generations, the head priest governs the main temple as well as the four branches, and the four high priests which he selects are entrusted with partial management of the four branches. And that’s how things were structured. However...

Now it’s been about two months. No one knows the cause of the fire that burned down the main temple. The head priest, as well as several priests who were inside the temple, didn’t make it out. After that, it was just like the incident promised. In other words, a succession struggle for the position of head priest.

Head Priest is equal to Holy Monarch, and it's stupid to think only a good-natured person would want that. What that means is if the priest is human, he will have worldly desires. Because this is called the city of temples, he who holds the position of head priest has control over the temples, and the city as well. And that's no exaggeration. Naturally, the high priests disagreed and disagreed. You can't say they had a good relationship to begin with, but they no longer had anyone to restrain their powers. And yet, the status of head priest is dangling in front of their eyes. It's not that there's no reason for them to disagree.

When they first met to discuss it, it just turned into boasting and slander, then continued with accusing each other of starting the fire, and then it ended in a quarrel. Since there weren't any witnesses, if the head priest's old friend- the Chief Counselor of the Sorcerer's Guild- hadn't happened to have been there, it might have turned into a battle royale where the winner got to advance to the next level. If by any chance it had been settled with a fistfight, there might have been peace afterward. But by not reaching a conclusion to the discussion, all that was left was animosity.

Shortly after, thugs and mercenaries were hired and sent to harass the other branches of the temple, and the dispute expanded until things were beyond repair. So the people we saw yesterday were involved in this conflict.

"Mmm... that sure turned sour..."

“As long as you didn’t hear me say it.” The Chief Counselor made a bitter face at my honest impression.

“But then... Aren’t they all clergymen? The ones we saw yesterday looked like genuine assassins. Isn’t that overkill?”

“I thought so too... but... The problem is that they don’t think so. The cause of the fire in the main temple still isn’t clear. Which makes it the only major problem. There are those who think if someone really wanted the position, they would start a fire and see that the head priest burned to death, wouldn’t they? And once they believe that, they also think that it wouldn’t be that mysterious if whoever did it, would aim for them next. Then they all get worked up thinking they need to defeat the other opponents before they get killed by miscreants themselves. And that’s how things have been.”

“I see...”

Someone hired some thugs and that’s where things really started. An eye for an eye. Someone hired thugs to oppose the thugs that had been sent after him, of course the thugs he hired would have to be more skilled than the others. That kind of power game escalated until it turns into things like yesterday’s showdown between the warrior and the assassin.

“Anyway, Miss Lina Inverse...”

“No.” I interrupted him with a big smile.

“” The Chief Counselor was silent for a while. “I still haven’t told you everything...”

“Yes, but while pouring out your story, you’ve already called me by my full name. No matter what you think, that makes me feel like you’re about to request something complicated.” At that the Chief Counselor grinned.

“We are always hearing about your exploits...”

Heehee... Here comes my strategy where I don’t listen to my opponent’s side...

“I said ‘no’ ♥”

“Somehow I’ve been managing things and making preparations here and there... In summary, ten days from now there will be another meeting where the four high priests will gather and decide who should become the next head priest. Then everything will be settled.”

“But I said ‘no.’”

“But probably within those 10 days, many people should be trying to start things. That’s the only thing that’s needs to be somehow prevented.”

“Hahahaha. But I just said ‘no,’ didn’t I?”

“I strongly believe that you can do something about this.”

“Well, I really need to be going so-”

“I’m begging you! You have to do somethiiiiing!”

“Dwaaaahhh! Get off of me!!”



“-And that’s how it is. We’ve got work to do, Gourry.”

“...huh?”

This was after we had left the Sorcerer’s Guild, in the dining hall of the inn we were staying at. I made my announcement, using a light tone whenever possible, but Gourry only frowned at me.

“Hey... didn’t you say while we were here we were just gonna take it easy and not do any work?”

"I didn't." I answered him clearly and readily. Actually. I feel like I did say something like that yesterday afternoon. But in this situation, we have to go with the changing of the times.

Damn... I really don't want to do this kind of work. It'd be nice if I could just say 'Someone from the Sorcerer's Guild is watching your actions, so it'd be best if you didn't do anything rash.' Then silently pressure them. But that's optimistic. Very Optimistic. Before they hired assassins, before they got each other worked up, then they probably would've said something like 'oh well, there's nothing we can do about it' but now there's no reason for them to be tame. In the worst case, in the eyes of their allies, we would be considered an impediment to their justice, reflecting as fear. In other words, we'd be getting into something dangerous.

But... The old man, who should've known better than to cling to me crying like that, still clung to me with his tears flowing. I told him it would be fifty- no, 100 gold coins if he wanted it to be completely settled. As one would expect, he couldn't refuse. Because up until this dispute, the temple had been backing the Sorcerer's Guild- or so some people think. But really this sort of thing is only natural.

You can discuss it to the end, but the guild and the temple are secretly closely connected. Secretly is just a way of saying that it's not good to talk about it. In short, the Sorcerer's Guild has the knowledge to develop healing

spells, and they sell that to the temple. There just hasn't been an official announcement of that. In comparison to the Sorcerer's Guild, the temple, with its lack of organization, doesn't have the power to develop healing spells on its own. But- they have to.

Those called humans are meant to be practical. Rather than tell the truth that religion won't cause miracles, even if it's completely false, they'll say what's most convenient for them. So they have a tendency to fall into a religion where what's convenient for them is causing miracles. To say it without being too blunt, take admirable ideals for example. Even if you have high ideals, if no one in your religion can perform a healing spell, you won't garner many clients- I mean, followers. And then of course, you wouldn't be an organization.

At the end of the day, all sorts of sorcery techniques can be bought from the Sorcerer's Guild: things like healing, detoxification, and purification, then passed off as 'Works of God' to those who come to the temple from other cities. The priests can receive personal instruction from the sorcerer's Guild and learn many spells. To put it short, for the Sorcerer's Guild, the temple is their best customer- and a large part of their income. Especially in this city where tourism from the temple is a large part of the city's income. So the Sorcerer's Guild receives a considerable amount of revenue from the temple. This is all simply because of their relationship. Because the Chief Counselor of the Sorcerer's Guild got along so well with the head priest, the fighting

that's occurring between the temple branches, probably makes his heart ache.

At any rate... We had lunch at the inn, then followed the road to the north end of the city. I roughly explained the gist of the situation to Gourry.

"I see... There's something bad going on in this city too..." he said in a carefree tone.

"Look Gourry... you say that like it's not our problem. We're also involved in the bad things that are going on."

"We're involved... Well, I can say it like it's not my problem because you're the one who took the commission."

"...gh! You can't say that to a female partner!"

"Uh, you being female isn't the problem... Wait, Lina, over there..."

"Huh?" I followed Gourry's gaze. White stone houses, stalls lining the main street, children running around. In the middle of this ordinary scene, there was one thing that was different. A giant, burned cathedral. It was made of stone. The original shape was still there, but from the inferno was a steeple covered in black soot and holes where you could peek through to see the surrounding houses.

"That's... the main branch where the fire was."

"Are we gonna go look?"

"We'll do that later. We should have plenty of time to stop by. More than that, I want to meet with the four high priests.

I want to somehow meet all of them face to face today.”

“Oh!” At that Gourry clapped his hands together. “So this means we’re going to see one of them!”

Swoop. My foot slipped and I almost fell over.

“Wh-What the hell did you think we walked here for?!”

“Uh... post-meal exercise? Sightseeing?”

“No... well, it doesn’t matter but... Anyway, we’re heading for the Water Temple in the north end of the city. It’s where Aqualord Ragraia is enshrined. The one in charge there is the high priest Kereth. And if we turn this way, next is–”

“Hold on!” Suddenly Gourry made me stop.

“What? Why so sudden?”

“Lina, right now you were about to describe the next person we’d meet at the next place we’d go, and then the next, and the next, right?”

“Yeah... why...?”

“Phew! That’s great!” Gourry said triumphantly. “If you describe all four of them at once, I’ll have an excuse not to remember them!”

“Don’t be proud of that! ...uh, well, I guess that’s kind of true... So then if I explain each person individually from place to place, you would kind of remember their names?”

“.....”

“..... hey”

“ In this world, many things are impossible.”

“Don’t say that so proud!”

Smack!

I jumped and chopped Gourry in the back of the head.

We finally arrived a while later. This city is pretty big... Anyway, there we stood inside a magnificent temple. Because it was a shrine to Aqualord, the building’s theme was a refined, blue design on a fairly wide plot of land. Only-most likely because of the fighting, the garden needed tending to and a number of street thugs had gathered around the foyer.

Mmm... this is gonna be rough... But this story can’t start unless I meet with the high priest, Kereth.

“Is the high priest here?!” I yelled, standing in front of the group of thugs.

“Huh? What’s that?” Probably the leader. He was sitting with his back to me and as he spoke, he stood up with a little sway. He turned and looked at- Hey!

“What do you want with- Wh- Hey!” My opponent cried out as he turned his eyes toward me. We both sized each other up.

“Ah! One of these thugs... is that you, Luke? What are you doing in a place like this?!”

“Same goes for you! W-Wait a second! Why did you have to say that sounding so completely disgusted?!” He scowled at me.

A tall man with black hair, light mail, and a somewhat evil look in his eyes. It was none other than the self-proclaimed treasure hunter, occasional idiot, and sorcerer-swordsman, Luke. Several times we had ended up involved in the same issues, and just a little while ago, in a certain incident, we formed a united front. When that incident was over, we set off traveling down different paths– or we should have. Well, looks like we’ve encountered each other.

“I figured you were dead.” I declared, without hesitating. Now that you mention it, he’s always with someone– but, when I looked around Luke, I couldn’t see his accomplice, Milina.

“Hm? Where’s Millina? Did she lose interest in you and run away?”

“Bu–! Why would you say that?! The bonds of love and trust between Milina and I are stronger than the rope you would use to climb mountains with!”

“A relationship of mutual trust is pretty broad, don’t you think?”

“Shut up! We both took the same guard job! Milina’s just guarding inside!”

“Hm... so in other words, she was too disgusted with you to work in the same location?”

“Noooo!! M-More than that! What do you want, finally?”

“Ah, right, right. This isn’t the time to be teasing you as much as I please.”

“Don’t come here just to do that!!”

“Like I said before, the high priest here– Kereth Rolencio. I came to meet with him.” Disregarding his objections, I got straight to business.

“Oh...” This man, in relation to Milina, went beyond being a fool to the point where he was almost limp. Despite looking this way, he had considerable skill.

“...For now, I’m the perimeter escort, by that, I want to ask you something. What do you want? –No, who are you allied with?”

“My role is a mediator for the Sorcerer’s Guild.” I answered, unwavering.

“Hm...” Luke was silent for a moment. “All right. I believe you. If you had been lying, your friend should’ve made a strange face off to the side.”

“Hold on! Is Gourry supposed to be my personal lie detector?!”

“Something like that. Anyway, I understand what you’re saying.” He spoke with his back to me as we walked. I kind of don’t understand what’s going on, but I can’t help how meaningless it is. My initial objective is to meet the high priest. As we approached the entrance, the guys– who I

really couldn't tell if they were mercenaries or street thugs- cleared out of the way, and Gourry and I were able to enter.

"This way." Luke led the way down a large corridor. For a tourist attraction, compared to what I'd heard, I couldn't see any tourists- er, worshipers. Well, with one situation on top of another, and all sorts of ill-bred people coming in and out of here, there's no reason any worshipers would want to stay. Of course, there were priests. They were just outnumbered by these guys who were either thugs or mercenaries. Naturally, I couldn't see the assassin-looking guy around anywhere. Eventually-

"We're here." Luke stopped in front of a single room, then knocked on the door. "It's Luke. You have guests."

"...guests?" another young man's voice came from beyond the door.

"Messengers from the Sorcerer's Guild- so they say."

"...you may come in."

Luke opened the door into a room that wasn't very big. Inside there was one face I recognized and three I didn't. The one I did recognize was a tall beauty wearing a leather shoulder guard with platinum blond hair- Luke's traveling companion, Milina. When she saw Gourry and I, her eyebrows moved a little, but that was her only reaction. Two of them were mercenaries, male and female. And the last person was a man sitting behind a desk with documents spread out across the top. He was a man with black hair in

his mid twenties. He was very handsome, but gentle- that is, he seemed weak. He was wrapped in priests' garments, meaning this man was one of the high priests in question.

"From the Sorcerer's Guild?" As he rose from his seat, he spoke in a reserved tone- that is, he sounded repulsed. "I am... the one responsible here. I am called Kereth Rolencio..."

"I was selected by the Chief Counselor of the Sorcerer's Guild and received the position of municipal guard. My name is Lina Inverse. This is my traveling companion- you can call him Gourry."

"Municipal... guard?"

"Yes." I grinned. "Because recently all sorts of dangerous things have been going on in this city. I'm looking out for a foolishly impatient group of colleagues who act like they aren't guilty of anything." Of course that last line was only there as a blatant insinuation.

"That is quite so! Lately it has been very dangerous! Very Dangerous!" Either he was kind of slow or he didn't realize it at all. After what I had said, Kereth kept nodding over and over. "Ever since the fire the atmosphere has been so strained... harassing each other or hurting each other. And then for me, someone hired people to come here and I've been so scared, so scared. In the end, it got to the point where I had to hire my own bodyguards just to sleep peacefully. The expense isn't too unreasonable." He started chattering on, all in one breath.

“Hey... uh...”

“Our dearly-departed Head Priest entrusted me to this temple, but look! We can’t enshrine the great Aqualord here. Well, that said, according to the folklore, Aqualord was destroyed one thousand years ago in the Kataart mountains when the Dark Lord was resurrected. But of course, that’s only a legend, a superstition. I believe that the great Aqualord is still in good health somewhere and is protecting over us all. There are those who don’t think that... but knowing that there are so many like that troubles me...”

“Hey...”

“Well, to put it simply, in relation to the other temple branches, this isn’t the only one that is unpopular right now. Sorry to trouble you with such a common story but- how do I say this? -compared to the other places, the offerings here are a bit small... That’s for certain. When the main temple was here, it managed the surrounding temples, and that was so there wouldn’t be any discomfort. Without the main temple, we’ve all had to somehow get by on our own, of course that’s plain to see, isn’t it? And then the bodyguards compensation-”

“I forgot everything he just said.” With High Priest Kereth’s story dragging on and on, Luke whispered as he was standing next to me. “This guy’s signature move is persistent complaining... I was going to tell you that from the start... but now it’s too late. Do you understand now why I separated myself from Milina?”



You could have said that from the beginning. While listening to the high priest run his mouth, I was cursing Luke from the bottom of my heart.

Evening approached the city.

“-And now the sun’s going doooowwnn!”

“It’s because that guy’s story was so long...” walking beside me, Gourry’s voice sounded tired.

Damn it, I was planning to go around to all four branches today. How is that we left around noon and only spoke to one person?! Of course at this hour it would be impossible to get around to all of the other branches. Listening to all of that complaining made me tired, so for today we would return to the inn. There's no choice but to go to the other branches tomorrow.

"Daaaaahhhh! This is aaaallllllllll that guy's fault!"

"If that's how you feel, why didn't you interrupt him?" I only waved my finger with a tsk-tsk at Gourry's foolish question.

"It's obvious. Whether it's through grumbling or gossip, the key to solving the incident will be mixed in."

"Hm.. So that's how it is... If you say that, then is this like a mystery case? Four people are fighting and we're just going to sit back and let them talk? Is that what you're saying?"

"Nfufufu... certainly it is. Okay? Originally, the cause of all this was the fire that burned down the main temple and killed the head priest. The situation got chaotic because the origin of the fire wasn't clear. It's not that someone started a fire, but that there was a rumor that someone started the fire. And for those four, once they suspected something, everything else looked suspicious. And that's what lead to the fighting. In the end, why was the fire started? Was it an accident or was it arson? And if it was arson. Who did it? And if that became clear, their suspicions would be cleared."

"I see. You couldn't find any clues in the area so you thought you'd just hear him out."

"That's how it was."

"So, any clues?"

"In the end, there weren't any. And that's why I'm mad."

"...I see..."

We spoke as we were walking down the main street. The burned remains of the main temple came into view.

Hm...

"Gourry, for now, let's stop by the wreckage for a bit."

"Uh... it doesn't really matter to me but..."

Even though the road back to the inn was only a little farther, the two of us started heading toward the temple. But we didn't worry about getting lost. Because this was a tourist attraction, if we just followed the main street we wouldn't have to even think about where we were going.

The site was excessively large. There was a fountain with garden trees, and benches.

And then- a giant burned temple. In front of it, there were several flowers left as an offering. In front of the building were two soldiers guarding the entrance, as if they didn't want anyone with mischievous objectives coming in. From their faces, they didn't seem too enthusiastic.

Hm... I wonder if they'll let us in...?

Of course if I used a flight spell, I could just go in through a blown out window. But in that case, if anyone questioned it, I'd be labeled as a suspicious intruder. And I still haven't decided whether or not there would be any clues inside...

"Lina, it's okay for us to go in." Gourry's voice...

"Wha-?!" Immediately I looked up. Before I could notice, Gourry was already smiling at me from beside the soldiers.

"H-Hold on!"

As I was running over one of the soldiers said, "Well then, I'll lead you inside." He said it in such a friendly voice.

"Uh... um, well... then, could we see the head priest's room?"

"Sure. This way, please."

We entered the building before us.

"Hold on, Gourry. What did you tell him?" falling a few steps behind the soldier, I whispered to him.

"What did I... I just told them we were officials from the Sorcerer's Guild and we wanted to look inside."

...you just said it so easily like that...? Is it really okay to do it that way? Because that's a really irresponsible method of investigation...

"How's the investigation going?" I asked the soldier to his back as we were ascending the stairs.

“It was most likely an accidental fire.” he gave me a wry smile over his shoulder. “There have been some disturbing rumors pouring out. Well, society loves rumors.”

After ascending the stairs, we crossed a corridor and climbed another set of stairs. The white walls were burned and stained with soot. Dirt and carbide covered the floor and stuck to the carpet.

“Because of the head priest’s preferences, they used candles instead of magic light. They also burned incense. Either of those could have spread to the tapestries and caused the fire. –Here’s the head priest’s room.” The soldier stopped. The room was more compact than I thought it would be. The windows were blown out and you could see the sky. Of course, there wasn’t any furniture and the only thing on the bare floor was a thin layer of ash. Because of the heat the walls were peeling, and over the layer of soot was a number of footprints, probably from those who entered during a previous investigation. Hmmmmmm....

“There’s nothing left to use as a reference, huh? Is there anywhere else you’d like to see?”

“Hey, right now, is there anyone else in the building besides us?” After being silent until now, Gourry asked suddenly.

“No. There shouldn’t be anyone here besides us...”

“Lina.” Gourry passed me a serious look. “I’m not sure when it started... but I’ve had a feeling like someone’s been

watching us.”

“...!”

I hadn't felt a presence. But, Gourry's senses were, plainly said, in a completely different league. He went past human limits by a wide margin.

“It's just your imagination. Well, we are at the site of where someone was burned to death. You're not going to get very good feelings.” Our guide said in a carefree tone. However. Between what the carefree guard was saying and Gourry's wild instincts, I believed in Gourry.

“Do you know where?”

“Sort of.”

“Let's go.”

With a brief conversation Gourry fled from the room, with me only one step behind him.

“Ah! Wait!” We ignored the guard's voice. We ran down the stairs and then through the hall.

“It moved!” Gourry said, changing course. We proceeded down a long hall where there used to be something on the ceiling, probably stained glass. But now there were only broken pieces, stained orange from the light of the sun, which continued to illuminate the floor and remains of the walls. And then—

“Here!” All at once, Gourry jumped across the room. I followed one step behind him. There was just an empty

room. There weren't any doors besides the one we came through, and if you count it as furniture, the only thing there was a burnt chandelier swaying from the ceiling. There wasn't anything else. No one was there.

"It disappeared...?" Gourry whispered, his words falling out.

"You had me worried! Running all over the place on your own... Look! There's no one here, okay?!" The guard finally caught up with us. As I listened to him from behind me, a strange premonition gripped my chest.

"I know one of those guys did it!" His self introduction went on and on. The high priest of the Flare Lord Vrabazard temple, Francis Dimitrio, spoke in an irritated voice.

Because we lost a whole day to High Priest Kereth's complaints yesterday, this morning, Gourry and I headed to the temple branch in the east end of the city. Of course, hanging around the temple were a bunch of guys who could have either been guards or street thugs. But the one we needed to get introduced to...

High Priest Francis' voice boomed. He was probably around forty, with blond hair that was cut short. He was a sturdy old man with wine-red robes.

"It's sincerely regrettable what happened to the Head Priest, Lord Joshua. He did everything in fairness and had such compassion. God would not have summoned an

accidental death for him! In this case, don't you think this must have been done by someone with evil enough intentions to do it by their own hand or by way of assassin?!" Somehow this is a really theoretical view he's elaborating on. "Well, at any rate... after about ten days, we're supposed to decide on a new head priest. I don't think I've said anything about it, but until then, there are going to be some rash actions. Please be careful."

"Did you say rash?!" At that high priest Francis raised his eyebrows.

"Don't you think pretending not to know that our great head priest was murdered and carelessly holding a discussion over who should be the new head priest is quite rash?! ...The reason the chief counselor of the guild sent help is to save face for agreeing on this discussion but... If the sinner who murdered him is among the high priests, I will never allow it! Not to mention...! If things took a turn for the worse and that man were to become the head priest, I most definitely would not allow it! I would use any method to stop it!"

"So you're saying, if it doesn't result in you becoming the head priest?"

"That doesn't matter!" Francis answered my question distinctly, without any hesitation.

Waaahhhh! This is no good! Sometimes it seems like priests and shrine maidens are the type to rush into things with their lives at stake for the sake of smiting evil. I've

traveled with someone exactly like that before. The only distinctive difference between Francis and my old traveling companion, is that this old man nowhere near as much charm. Well... if this old man was overflowing with charm, it would be more weird than anything.

“...hahh...” I let out a little sigh. “I admire you’re resolve. But. If this was a murder, one of the other three high priests is the culprit. Conversely, that means two of them haven’t done anything. Remember that. Well then, we’ll be excusing ourselves.”

“Yes. -And somehow, before this meeting takes place, I’d like the sinner to be revealed. ...before things get any worse.”

Of course, that only means, if we can’t do it in time, his resolve will be greater. He was only declaring that.

“This is really bothering me..” We were heading down the road to the next temple on the west side of the city- The shrine of Airlord. I spoke in a gloomy tone.

“Just now, Francis told us he felt like there was going to be some trouble...”

“But from the beginning, there’s the chance that there isn’t a culprit. The fire might just be an accident.” Gourry said. But I just shook my head and lowered my voice.

“That’s not how it is. The officials are saying it’s accidental but... there’s no mistake. It was an assassin.”

“Really?!”

“Yesterday we saw the head priest’s room. In the hallways on the way there, the carpets and tapestries were carbonized. But only the head priest’s room had large amounts of ash in it. On top of that, it looked like the walls were peeling. In other words, only in that room was the temperature hot enough to melt the walls and turn everything to ash. It would be a different story if there had been oil or firewood in there, but this was not an ordinary fire. Probably... they used an attack spell to roast the head priest alive, then started fires around the building to make it look like an ordinary fire.”

“So then it really was one of the high priests...?”

“I don’t know that much but...”

“Miss Lina and Mr. Gourry, was it?”

Suddenly. I heard a voice that I remembered from one side. When I turned that way I saw Luke and Milina, accompanying High Priest Kereth!

Ga-! This is bad! If he uses his Complain Attack here-!

“Well-”

“It’s okay, I heard from Mr. Luke and Miss Milina afterward. They were acquaintances of yours from before. Ah, but fate is very strange isn’t it? Meeting like this both today and yesterday.” Before I could speak, once again he started going on and on! Damn! We’re really in troubbllllle!

“You see, every morning I leave flowers as an offering at the main temple, and just now we were on our way back. Mr. Luke and Miss Milina are here because with all of the danger going on, it’s better to refrain from carelessly going out walking. When our great head priest was alive, he was so helpful and leaving flowers is the least I can do for him, I think. Well this way we could accompany the two of you. Would that not give you peace of mind?”

“Is it okay for a high priest to travel through the center of the town? How enthusiastic of you.”

The one who stopped Kereth from talking wasn’t me. Standing in the street a little way off, was a group of about ten thugs. They were probably hired by someone. All right! Way to go, street thugs! You really shut him up! As a reward, I’ll go easy on you and defeat you quickly. They walked toward us in such a way that it seemed like they were announcing ‘we’re powerful and we’re about to be unreasonably mean!’

“Well, Aqualord must not have a very popular shrine, or else you wouldn’t be able to go out doing things like this, huh?”

“Well, honestly if it were in the middle of town, it’d be a pretty annoying eyesore. Kind of like how we must be to these innocent bystanders.”

“Who the hell are you calling innocent bystanders? And just by being there your faces are an annoying eyesore.”

?!

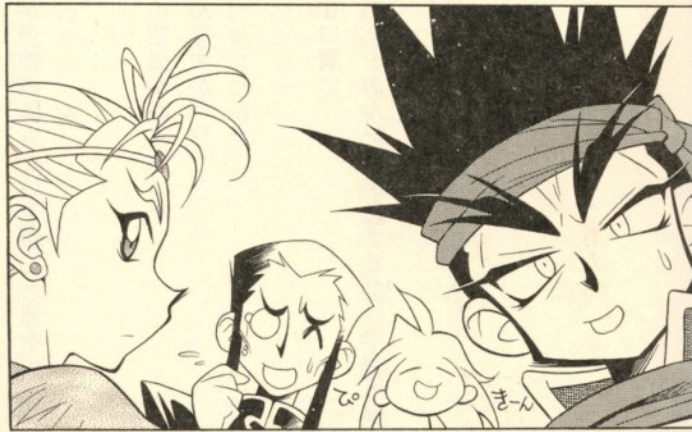
After I gave my very honest opinion, the air around us froze.

“Ahhhh! Miss Lina, why would you say something like that?!”

I ignored the high priest’s words.

“H-Hey... girl, what the hell did you just say?!”

When one of the little punks threatened me, I purposefully replied in my weakest sounding voice. “N-No... I didn’t say anything... it’s just... I was thinking that all of your breathing was polluting the air...”



“Y-You bitch!”

“That all you have to say?!”

“Don’t you make light of us!”

All at once they started sounding off and coming toward us. Er... well, I really was making light of them...

“Dimillua Wing!”

TZOBODOOOM!

“Bwaaahhh!?”

“I’m a little late on the introduction but...” I said looking down at the convulsing men scattered across the stone pavement. “I was commissioned by the Sorcerer’s Guild to be a municipal guard. In this case, because all sorts of dangerous people were acting out, so I made sure there weren’t any disturbances.”

“Y-you... just now... caused a disturbance...” one of them refuted me while still twitching on the ground. I only laughed through my nose.

“Phew. I never said ‘you guys can’t cause a disturbance,’ did I?”

“That logic...!”

“Setting logic and methods aside! You guys were about to cause some trouble and I prevented it, OK? That said... Now, let’s get a confession out of you right away. Who hired all of you?”

“No way... er, if I don’t talk...?”

“Burst Rondo.”

CHUDODODODODON!

“Now. Will you tell me?”

“...Tell ...you?”

“Your employer ♥”

“... Mr. Brahn ... to the west ...”

“Mm-hm! Thank you for your cooperation!”

“Um... this is all... how could you just...”

In response to whatever High Priest Kereth was mumbling, I just waved my hand.

“You don’t need to worry about it! If you think of it as being a divine work of God then it shouldn’t bother you, right?”

“What kind of god is that...?”

“Well, anyway. It’s not that I can’t understand the sentiment of wanting to leave flowers but... It really is better if you refrained from going out. The thugs you saw just now seemed to have a pretext, so they’ll probably be causing more trouble.” Going off of what I said, Gourry nodded heavily and added, “Yeah, and we still don’t know who assassinated the head priest. If you wander around aimlessly, they might aim for you.”

UGH!

At that the air around us froze.

Th... This... Mayonnaise head!

“Ah...! A-Assassin...?” Kereth said in a hoarse voice. “Then...! Our head priest really was murdered?!”

“Yeah. That’s what she told me anyway. Only the head priest’s room was seriously burned, and some other stuff... Right, Lina?”

Each word struck my skull with a thwack! Thwack! You... You...!

“Anyway, at that, it’d be good if you didn’t go wandering around aimlessly.”

“U-Understood...! Mr. Luke, Miss Milina, Let’s go!” He said with his face a deep shade of blue, and then he left quickly as if he was running away.

“Yeah. Be careful, okay?” Gourry just smiled and waved as they turned their backs.

“WORMS FOR BRAINS!!”

BAM!

“Bah-!” I delivered a full power kick to Gourry’s back.

“What was that for, Lina?!”

“What the hell was that?! Why would you just say that all of a sudden Gourry?!”

“Huh...?” Gourry knit his brow and cried out like an idiot, and I leaned in close to him and lowered my voice.

“Why did you just tell him that the head priest was assassinated?!”

“Huh? But... The way he talked, he sounded like he was just quietly returning, so I thought...”

“Look! For now, it’s not clear to everyone if the fire was an accident or a murder!”

“But you made it clear, so isn’t it okay?”

“It is not! Well, it’s not really a bad thing on it’s own, but it’s bad to let people know about it right now!”

“...why?”

Raagh! This bird-brain!

“Look! If we tell the four high priests that are opposing each other that the fire was possibly an accident, they might act relatively docile. But if the assassin story gets spread around, they’ll all act out at once! For example, High Priest Francis who we just met! You’ll think he’s joking when he says ‘I knew it was an assassin! I must take care of this!’ but then he might attack the other three high priests! But more than that! The culprit might be among the high priests! If that’s true, there’s no doubt the culprit would act before we could stop him. If the murderer was exposed, no matter how many people he killed afterward, it wouldn’t matter. There could be an all out attack to get rid of the other high priests, but before that, his first targets would unmistakably be... us. The one’s who led the investigation!”

“...whoa.”

“Not whoa! If it’s turned out like this, there’s no other way. If we’re only a little pushy, we won’t stop the culprit. And before our enemy makes a full-scale movement...”

“Then... what should we do?”

“For now... Our destination hasn’t changed. The temple of Airlord Vaarwin in the west, to meet High Priest Brahn.” Our plan of interaction didn’t change considerably, but... There was a soft murmur within my chest.

Representing the sky, it was a palace painted white and sky-colored, with a wide and thoroughly maintained garden. Except for its color, it had the exact same appearance as the East and North temples. Incidentally, the East temple we visited was red, that is, brick-colored. Of course, because of all the recent disturbances, there weren't any worshipers around the temple.

But different from the East and North temples, we couldn't see any thugs hanging around in front. The ones I sent flying out in the town probably came from here originally. They knew Kereth went to offer flowers every morning, so they nonchalantly went out on their pretext, and faced my judgment- or something like that. Well, whatever happened, it certainly made it easier for us to enter. Gourry and I, with our hands on the entrance to the foyer, pushed open the doors-

"Ugh-!" at the same time, we groaned a little. Inside... it was thick with the choking stench of blood.

Sellentia, When the Flame of Hatred is Lit

Instantly, without saying anything, Gourry ran inside. I couldn't hear anything, but I continued after him. The interior was exactly the same as the two temple branches we visited earlier. The only difference- this one had several corpses strewn about the passageway.

Some of them were priests, but probably double that amount were thugs. The assassins probably chose to raid the place when the security was weak. We eventually turned a corner and ran down a long hallway. Directly in front of us there was a door. If the building's structure was the same, then this should be the high priest's private room.

"Hah!" Gourry stopped and with a yell, he drew his sword and sliced through the air.

There was a small sound, like something rupturing. I didn't see whatever happened behind me, but it was probably...

An outstretched hallway lined with pillars. And then the sporadically scattered bodies. From the shadow of a pillar, a black figure appeared. An assassin?! He was still in the building?! And not just one. From the shadows of the pillars, a total of four appeared. Sensing us drawing near, they concealed their presences and their bodies. They were probably planning on attacking us suddenly but- With their bloodlust rising, and sensing Gourry's wild instincts, the

enemy intercepted us by launching projectile weapons. If we could somehow manage to capture one alive, we could find out who hired them. All right. In that case–

Gourry readied his sword and slowly closed the distance between them. Standing behind him, I grabbed the edge of his clothes and pulled him back.

“Who are you people?!” Catching onto my signal, he stopped and yelled at the assassins. “Did you defeat everyone here?! What about the high priest?!” Of course, if these were pro assassins they wouldn’t have answered his questions. They only snorted at his nonsense. But, his nonsense questions did buy us some time! I released the spell I had been casting.

“Sleeping!”

“Wh-?!” gasps of astonishment leaked from the assassins mouths.

From its name, this is a spell that puts everyone within a fixed range to sleep. By stopping Gourry from closing in on them, I was able to cast a sleeping spell on the enemy alone. This way we could capture them.

“...gh...”

“...mm...”

Two of the fallen assassins groaned. The other two... weren’t effected at all?! Now that I think about it, I’ve heard that the maximum number of minds this spell can effect is pretty low but...

One of the remaining assassins was lunging toward Gourry with a large dagger, and the other was headed for his fallen comrades. He was planning on waking them up so they could all attack. But with this spell, you fall asleep temporarily, and you can't just wake right up again. With one of them charging at Gourry, he unleashed an attack with his sword. As they were approaching each other, the assassin drew an arc with his dagger. And then, just before the blades were about to meet, the assassin pulled out another dagger with his left hand. His strategy was to catch the blow with the dagger in his right hand, and in the moment when he stopped Gourry's attack, he would strike with the dagger in his left.

However! With one attack, Gourry sliced through the dagger and the assassin! Setting aside the contents of his brain, when it came to swordsmanship, Gourry was a genius. And on top of that, he has this sword now. It's proudly the sharpest sword of all time, with its name passed down through legends, the Blast Sword. With Gourry's skill and the Blast Sword together, it's no surprise that this was possible. The assassin fell without making a sound. And now there were only three left. Or so I thought.

Boom!

There was the sound of an intense explosion. One of the assassins had placed his hand against the wall of the corridor and that's where the explosion came from. The spell he used was probably Blast Wave. That way he was able to

open a whole in the wall, which he used to flee outside. What a strange occurrence. The one just now left behind his sleeping comrades. It can't be-!

I panicked and ran over toward them. The two assassins that should have been sleeping had had their throats slit. *Bastard!*

The one that got away, ran over to these two, and when he couldn't wake them, he sent them into eternal slumber. All that just to seal their mouths. Using this method, he must have been a pro, otherwise he'd just be a homicidal maniac.

"Lina!" As Gourry ran toward me, I just shook my head.

"It's no use. They were killed by the one that just ran away."

"Are we gonna follow him?!"

"No... It's probably useless. More than that, right now we need to check inside the room. I already have a general idea... of the results..." And it was just as I had imagined. Inside the room, mixed in among several mercenaries, was a man clad in priests robes.

The western High Priest, Brahn Concnelle.

The town was in an uproar. But that was natural. Someone had hired assassins to kill one of the high priests. And the worst part was that this was clearly a murder. Now all the rumors that the head priest had been murdered, were even

more tinged with the truth. In the end, we couldn't find out the assassins' identities, which meant we couldn't find out who hired them. Of course, after this incident the officials had a mountain of questions for us. Luckily, the Sorcerer's Guild was able to verify my identity and we were allowed to leave. However. It was only on the condition that until this case is solved, we aren't allowed to leave the city. The next day the two of us went to visit the high priest of the south, Ryan Seinfort.

"You two?! You were the ones who witnessed yesterday's incident from the very beginning!" When we met him he didn't even introduce himself. He just impulsively got on his high horse.

He was around forty years old. He had brown hair with occasional streaks of gray, a strong physique and a low, refined voice. I felt like if he preached in a calmer voice, he might be a dignified clergyman. But, surrounded by maybe ten mercenaries, leaning back in his chair and yelling to the point where it was no use trying to talk to him- he was nothing but a short-tempered old man.

"Don't tell me... Is being a mediator for the Sorcerer's Guild just a front and you're actually assassins from someone else?! Eh?!"

I honestly wasn't sure if he was this neurotic because someone in his line of work was killed or because he was the one behind all of this. It goes unsaid, but once you suspect

someone, everything will seem suspicious. But even knowing that, this guy is *really* mad. I kept nodding at him.

“Well, certainly given your disposition, it wouldn’t be mysterious if you invoked someone’s malice to the point where they would send assassins but...”

“What?!”

“Well, for now you can rest at ease. We aren’t like that. We have no intention of following *someone like you* around.”

“...Hey now, Lina...” Gourry spoke out against my provocations, but for now I ignored him. High Priest Ryan was turning red with anger.

“Wh-! *Someone like me-?! What a rude-!*”

“Ah. Please don’t worry about it. Compared to someone who rudely sends assassins for their first meeting, insulting someone on the first meeting isn’t so rude.” I said with a big grin.

“Gh-!”

“Anyway.” I distinctly interrupted him in the middle of whatever he was about to say. I understand that you’re anxious, but please don’t make any rash decisions after nightfall. There’s a chance that someone may believe that you’re the one behind all of this. Don’t forget that. Well then, we’ll be off.”

“Ngh-! Grr-!” After making a one-sided statement and leaving Ryan in the middle of what he was saying, we turned

our backs on the mercenaries with their rising bloodlust, and left the room.

“Hey, hey! Was that really okay, Lina? What you said in there?” As we headed for the branch exit, Gourry spoke to me in a low voice.

“It’s fine. If he isn’t behind this, then I just made it so his anger would be directed at us instead of the other high priests. On the other hand, if he is behind this, he would aim for us before the other high priests. And then the tables would turn and this case would be solved quickly and efficiently.”

“I see... So you weren’t just back-talking.”

Ack.

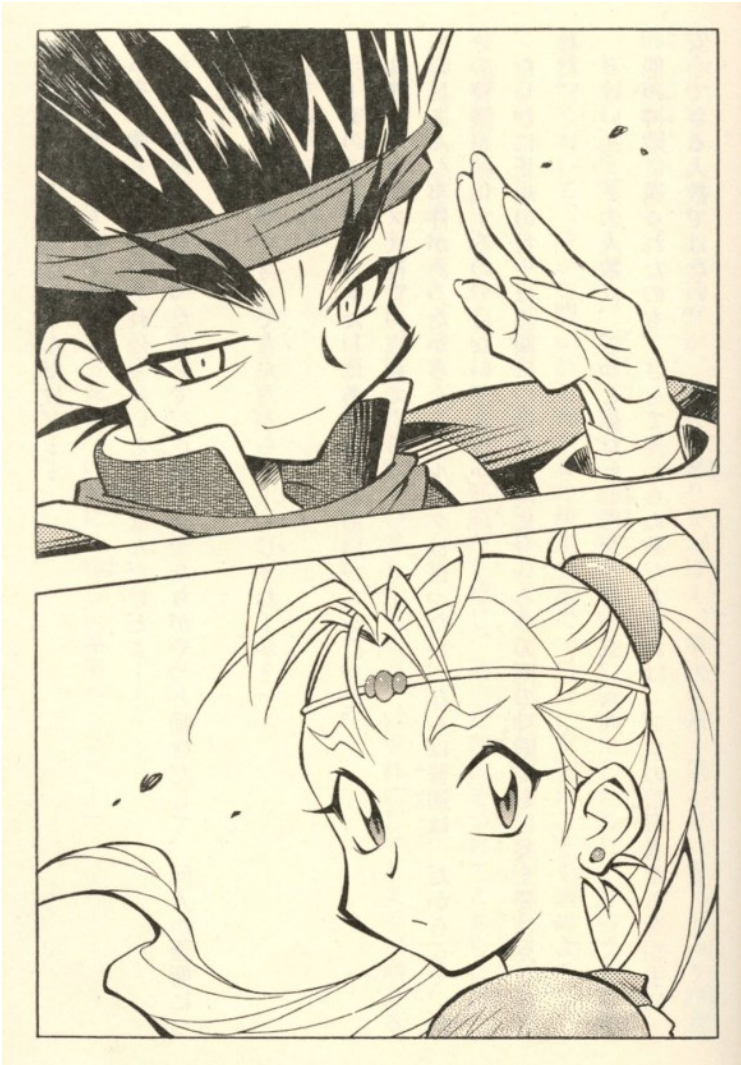
“Uhh, naturally. I thought you’d say something like that.”

“For some reason that ‘uhh’ just now was a little suspicious...”

“A-All in your imagination!” As we left the building we were talking about things like that when-

“Yo.”

Waiting for us were two familiar faces.



“Luke! Milina!” I looked all around but I couldn’t see High Priest Kereth anywhere. We walked toward the two of them.

“What’s wrong? It seems like High Priest Kereth isn’t around... Don’t tell me, he was ogling over Milina so Luke knocked him out and you lost your jobs?”

“That’s likely, but it didn’t happen.” Milina quietly answered my question. “We’re out on dispatch from High Priest Kereth.”

“Dispatch?” I asked as I raised an eyebrow. This time Luke answered.

“Yeah. Because of what happened yesterday. He heard that the head priest had been murdered and now he can’t help wanting to have this case solved. He said since the officials couldn’t see that it was a murder, he can’t depend on them. But the two of you aren’t enough on your own, so he sent some trusted friends to help you out.”

“Well... that’s fine but... Aren’t you his guards?”

“Even with us, he’s still worried.. But because of what happened yesterday, he hired legitimate soldiers and now he has plenty of guards. If the one concerned about it says it’s fine, then it’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Hmm...” I only vaguely agreed to everything Luke said. The problem was High Priest Kereth’s true intentions. Luke said this was because of yesterday, but normally you wouldn’t strengthen your forces just because of that. You can certainly use legitimate soldiers as guards. Even looking around the south temple, I could see soldiers. There were probably around five or six of them. But if they were sent out to other temples, without changing the amount, and they had to face assassins, then this wasn’t an amount you could rest easy with.

Of course, High Priest Kereth remembers the incident with rage and has a strong desire for it to be solved. That’s the most favorable explanation. But thinking about it another way, since we’re mediators for the Sorcerer’s Guild, it may

be more advantageous for him in the eventual head priest decision meeting if he creates an obligation of gratitude to himself. In the worst case, he's the mastermind in all this and he'll feel that it's actually more of a burden to have us so close to Luke and Milina, so he'll come up with some vague reasoning and impose some decision on us.

-But I can't help thinking otherwise. At any rate, if we increase the number of help, it will definitely be more convenient.

"Understood. I could use your help."

"Sure. So, first off, where do we go from here?"

"First we should gather information. In this area, there's a row of cheap hotels. It's a pretty shady place."

The place was in the southern tip of the city. All of the filthy houses and suspicious shops and suspicious taverns were all lined up and down a gloomy street. Naturally it's a place where hoodlums gather, at least that's the kind of picture it paints. Heading further south from the southern temple branch you would reach downtown. This is called the city of temples, and in any city that's more than just a place for people to live in, there will always be a place like this. Our enemy is a pro assassin. If he was hiding himself it would probably be around here. If they were coming from the wire-puller, the assassins would have an innocent look to them and they'd be mixed in among the guarding mercenaries. At least, that would be the most convenient

method. That way, by simple contact, they could become temporary guards.

Conversely, if the assassin ended up being hired by his target, he wouldn't have exposed his own face. He probably conceals himself elsewhere, and then at certain scheduled times, he'll visit the wire-puller and receive his orders. If that's the case that's where we need to visit first. Well, they could do something unexpected and stay at a luxury hotel at the heart of the city, but that's not likely since it would be easy to trace.

"So then... I think... we should split up. Me and Gourry, and then Luke and Milina, then we can gather information. It's not *necessary* but..."

"Oh well. I think it'd be fine if we divided the work." said Luke.

"In that case... If you expose your urge to kill, you won't surprise anyone. Now, are you going to come out quietly?" At my announcement, it was silent for a moment and then-

"I can't really help if it leaks out." Alongside the voice, a man's figure appeared from the shadows.

One... two... From the shadows here on this street. From shadows over there. They appeared in succession, but they weren't assassins. From the way they looked, they must have been thugs, about ten of them.

"The sight of you guys loitering around here is really an eyesore. It's almost painful to look at." said a man with a

scar on his cheek. He looked like he was their boss. Hmm... I thought a bit, then started casting a small spell in my mouth.

“Heh. You seem like a nice guy.” Luke snorted. “I think you might be about as promising an opponent as a pile of fish.”

“The hell you say?!” Anger colored the boss’ face. “You makin’ fun of us?! We’ll show you!”

“Yeah!” The little fishes cried out, and came rushing at us all at once. At that moment–

“Diem Wing!” I released the spell I had been casting. My spell produced a strong gust of wind that was capable of blowing away a child with an umbrella, but not enough to kill or wound anyone. But I wasn’t aiming for the thugs. I released my spell directly above. Instantly–

BOOM!

There was an explosion with a bright light just above our heads.

“Wha-!?” The thugs cried out in shock. Of course, it wasn’t my spell that had exploded. My spell had collided with a fireball that had been released from a rooftop, causing it to scatter in midair. There’s no mistake that the spell came from some assassins hiding up on the roof. They were probably sent by the wire-puller to kill us.

But of course they knew with all of these thugs around, they couldn’t compete. In spite of all that, they were hired to attack weaklings like this. In that case, we were just a lure.

The likely winner would probably be the assassins. Hidden on the rooftops of the surrounding buildings and suppressing their bloodlust, while these street thugs gave off an intense desire to kill, they were able to attack. Reading that, I cast a spell to intercept theirs. And it seems I got a bulls-eye.

“..H-Hey! You didn’t even flinch! You’re just showing off your fancy spells!” The boss man shouted.

“Y-Yeah!” blindly following him, the other thugs started rushing toward us again!

Hey! Could these guys use their brains a little bit?! If they don’t pay attention, these thugs will get caught in an attack from the real assassins. In fact, if I hadn’t intercepted that fireball just now, they would have gotten caught in it. But without realizing that, the thugs just continued to underestimate us and plunge forward without thinking about anything. Just then–

“Freeze Arrow.” Milina’s ice spell crashed into a number of thugs and quickly incapacitated them. Next, Gourry drew his sword.

“Hah!” With a yell, he sliced through the air.

“Gyaahhwaaaaagh!”

After a strange sound, a number of the thugs cried out and went flying. But he hadn’t hit them with part of the blade. He had struck them with the belly of the sword. Well... doing something like that is kind of ridiculous. It would have

broken... if it were a normal sword. Going against this many enemies with Gourry's seriousness and the Blast Sword, I feel like that was kind of immature.

Luke went running at the thugs with his sword. I began casting my next spell while fighting back with my short sword. Clearly, the thugs' skills were on par with low level soldiers so this would be an easy victory. That is- there wasn't even a contest. But these guys weren't our real enemies. The moment we made contact with them...

Pssh. There was a small sound overhead, like something bursting. I knew they'd come! I separated myself from the thug I was matched with and jumped far back, opening the space between us. I took my sword in hand, raised it at a slight angle- and threw it into the sky.

Instantly.

An awful noise echoed above us, as if the sky was being torn apart. A countless number of lights converged on the short sword I had cast away, and made a direct hit with the thug right beneath it.

When the hidden assassins threw a fireball, I was able to sense it and defend against it. Because of that, this time they used a lightning spell with a wide scope that couldn't be deflected with a wind spell. But I sensed it again, and throwing my sword into the air, it became a lightning rod.

...which was unfortunate for the thug directly underneath it.

“Wench! Using such strange tricks-!” And once again, the boss shouted after mistaking it for my spell.

Daaahh! You’re so slow! Don’t you realize anything?!

From the roofs and windows of nearby buildings, a number of black figures swooped down to the battlefield. The assassins came out! Since I kept defending against their spells, they appeared to stop the numbing.

“Wh-What the-?! Fine! It doesn’t matter! We’ll take both of you on!” Without comprehending the situation at all, the thugs’ boss handed down another stupid order.

Hold on! Are you serious?! Are you thinking at all?! Hey!

And that’s when the free-for-all started. I easily evaded one of the thugs charging at me, then wrapped around to the back of his flailing body and chopped him in the back of his head.

“Gegh!” He made a weird cry and grabbed his neck for support, while I kicked his legs out from under him, causing him to make a half-turn. I grabbed the short-sword that slipped out of his hands and used it as a replacement for the sword I had just thrown away. The moment I got the sword into my hands, a black shadow appeared in my field of vision. An assassin! His hand moved in my direction. Was that a throwing knife?! But right at that moment–

“You bitch!” Another thug, a friend of the opponent I just defeated, jumped at me.

Waagh! Moron!

With a thick, dull sound, the thug's body quivered a little and he collapsed where he was. From the assassin's perspective, he would have seen him jump in front of the knife and catch it in his back. He couldn't have been expected an interruption like that. The assassin's movement stopped momentarily.

"Freeze arrow!" I released the spell I was casting! But the one I was aiming for was a pro. He promptly jumped back and avoided a direct hit from my spell, taking shelter among the thugs. In exchange, some of the thugs around him took a direct hit and were frozen.

"Ahh!"

"Bitch!"

All of them cried out at once and rushed toward me.

Hey! If you're gonna keep picking a fight with us, don't complain! If things continue like this, you're all gonna get blasted away! With a hard decision to make, I began chanting a spell in my mouth.

At that moment the other three had their own fights developing. With his sword, Gourry slashed through the swords of the thugs and repelled throwing knives from the assassins. The moment that he stopped their attacks, one or two people went crawling away. Luke was catching blows from thugs one right after another. As one of the opponents

was flailing, Luke kicked into his flank and struck another enemy as he drew near.

“Gwah!”

And then to finish both of them off- “Dug Wave!”

BOOM!

-he used an attack spell. One of the assassins came running at him.

“Die, Bastard!” At the same time, one of the thugs came charging at the assassin. The assassin hurriedly countered.

Both men were probably hired by the same person, but the thugs were never informed that the assassins were allies. Well, that makes sense. If you have a pile of men working on your side, you shouldn't just tell them ‘Hey, you guys are just decoys. The assassins are gonna attack from above, so you guys will just have to die with the enemy, okay? ♥’ But this situation happened all because I went melee in order to defend against the assassin's attack spells.

Milina was also repelling the thugs sword attacks. “Fel Za Rhed!” Without looking back, she suddenly fired her spell in a different direction. There, an assassin had drawn near by hiding in the shadow of one of the thug's body. He probably didn't think she'd be able to read his own movements. She blew him away with a direct hit.

“D-Don't make fun of us!” With his sword drawn and his back bent, a young, blonde thug came plunging at her. Once again Milina swung her sword at face-height.

“Heeee!” The thug quickly crouched down, and using that energy he flopped forward, the momentum causing him to graze Milina’s flank with his sword. She responded by–

“Gweh!?”

Stepping on his back and taking on a new opponent. At that point I had completed my spell.

“Dimillua Wing!”

FWOOOSH!

An explosion of wind blew away one of the assassins and a number of thugs. All right. With that we’d greatly reduced their numbers.

“T-These guys are tough!” one of the thugs cried out. ... but y’know, it’s a little late to just be noticing that now.

Only a short time had passed since the fight had started but we had already reduced the number of thugs by half, and we had defeated two of the assassins which meant there were only three left. That’s when the thug boss spoke up.

“If you’re gonna go this far then we really can’t forgive you! Time to get serious!”

Get serious?! Usually you’d just run away!

“YEAH!” the thugs let out an energetic cry. Really, you guys just need to stop.

“OH YEAAAHH” The one with the most fired-up cry came charging with his sword ready. While I chanted my spell, I took my short sword and–

That instant, a strange feeling ran down my back. Almost reflexively, I took a great jump to the side. My cape tore as it fluttered. *Fwip*. With a small sound, the man who had been running toward me shivered, spurted blood, and fell down where he stood.

What the hell?!

Someone had thrown a knife from behind me, and because I dodged it, this thug ate it directly. From the situation it seems that whatever was thrown just now wasn't a knife. And I feel like it was too sharp to have been a wind spell.

"Careful! There's something weird going on!" Just in case, I called out a warning to everyone.

"Something weird?!" Luke asked as he finished off a thug with a kick.

"What does that mean?!" And Gourry followed after slashing through an assassin. And then...

"So you finally realized it..." The one who said it, was one of the thugs. Those words were a signal for the fight to stop.

"Huh? What?"

"What the...? What's going on?" Among the thugs, some made confused faces and whispered to themselves.

"I've had enough of this act." The thug boss said.

"Act...? What are you talking about?! Hey!"

"You don't need... to know." As he said it, a number of the thugs moved.

“-gh!”

“Gaugh!”

Sometimes from their throats, sometimes from their chests, and sometimes from their sides. The men who didn't move spurted blood and collapsed. The ones they thought were their comrades had caught them by surprise. There was a difference in skill from the start, so of course they did this easily. All that was left was three thugs- no, three men that appeared to be thugs, and two assassins.

“What the hell's going on?! Huh?!”

“There were assassins mixed in with the street thugs.” I answered Gourry.

They did all that talking without running away and continuing to fight a useless fight, all so that we would lower our guard. But to do that, they had to attack their own men, as hard as they could. What were they planning on doing if I hadn't defended against their spells? Bastards...

“I guess it can't be helped that you noticed it... And now that we've removed all these annoyances... we can all get serious.” The expression vanished from the scarred face of the man who had acted as the boss. His face changed from that of a third rate thug boss to that of one who lived in darkness.

They're coming!

The assassins all kicked the ground at once. At the same time, Gourry dashed forward. He attacked by passing right

by one of them and bisecting him.

“Flare Arrow!” Luke and Milina simultaneously released spells piercing the remaining four.

“Gah?!”

Only one assassin took the hit directly and collapsed with a scream. The other three- took a direct hit, but continued rushing forward. It wasn't effective?! Luke and Milina appeared slightly disturbed.

“Jah!” One of them- the blond one who Milina had stepped on -swung his left arm. He was outside of sword reach. Milina immediately jumped to the side

“-ck!?” Both of her arms had shallow cuts. It didn't look like the enemy had thrown anything. No way- a wind shockwave?! That means these guys are...!

“Milina!” Luke panicked and ran toward her, but someone else was standing in his path- The one who appeared to be the boss.

“I won't let you go.”

“You're in my way!”

He caught Luke's sword with his own. Suddenly, a lance of fire appeared between Luke and the man. Luke retreated back and as it was released, he twisted his neck to avoid it.

One of the remaining ones came charging at me, preparing his hands in a strange position. *You think I'll let you do that?* I released the spell I had prepared.

“Blast Ash!”

Blackness formed above the enemy and swallowed him. I got lucky in that I happened to cast this spell. If I had cast something like a fireball...

Gourry immediately turned to cover Milina. But when he saw him coming, Milina’s opponent jumped back, widening the distance between him and Gourry.

“Forgive me for not being eager to fight in close quarters with you!” He said to Gourry. He continued as he looked around and noticed the guy who had been turned to dust by my spell. “Ch! That was probably the guy that kept saying not to take him lightly... Then he fails. Get back, Zaikel!” According to the blond man’s voice, the man dueling with Luke jumped back.

“Who the hell are these guys...?”

“You haven’t noticed?” I said to a slightly dumbfounded Luke.

“Now that you mention it, we have fought these guys before.” Gourry said as he remembered his instincts.

“Yeah, it’s just as Gourry says. We previously fought their accomplices.” I said. Just now, when they took Luke and Milina’s Flare arrows head on without a scratch, and when the lance of flame appeared without reciting an incantation. The ones who can do things like that are...

“Mortal demons.”

Previously in the city of Solaria, there was a madman burning with the ambition to revive his ruined kingdom. In doing this he called forth demons from the Astral Plane to possess humans- no, to fuse with humans, producing beings of strong magical power. They are unaffected by low-level sorcery and have a good command over simple spells without reciting incantations- The magical power of a Lesser Demon and the knowledge of a man. And while it has the flesh of a human being it is still able to cross through space. For my own convenience, I called them mortal demons. The four of us plus one other, through our efforts, we were able to crush this madman wrapped in his own ambitions. But I can't believe I'm meeting the refugees of that event in a place like this.

It makes sense. When the Sleeping spell wasn't effective at the west temple, the problem wasn't so much that their spirits were too worked up, but that they weren't even entirely human... Which means they wouldn't have been hurt by a direct hit from a Fireball or a raging thunder attack. Letting their friends hit them from above wasn't such an unreasonable tactic after all.

"Mortal demons? Well it doesn't matter what you call us." The blond man said with a smile. "At any rate, we have a debt to repay from 'that one time.'"

"That one time?" I said with a scowl. Certainly the time we were in Solaria, we should have defeated all of them.

“You don’t remember? Well then... I’ll remind you!” As he said it he swung his left hand. He didn’t throw anything but... Instantly Gourry pushed his was in front of me, brandishing his sword.

It was the same sound I had heard at the west temple, a sound like something rupturing. This is...! There was no mistaking it. With a wave of his left hand he had produced an invisible shockwave, which transformed into a blade as it was released. The fused human-demons we fought in Solaria had this same kind of power. But...

“There’s... no way...”

“Oh? Your face says you might remember something.”

“But you should be dead!”

“I didn’t die. You cut through my stomach, so all you did was separate my upper body from my lower body. Where have you been until now that you would think I was dead?” He revived from that condition?! And to say such irrational things so easily...

“Now that you say that... Even though this guy’s boss was cut in half, he was still happy and energetic...” Luke said in a dark tone.

Then it’s just as I thought. This guy is-

“Zord... was it? I’m sure...”

“Right, right. Just as you say. Seems you’ve remembered.” Zord answered me with a grin. “Our comrades weren’t in

Solaria alone. Because of that time, we were scattered all over the place. More than that... Back then, you took out our boss. Thanks to you, I now have to take on a job like this until that debt is properly repaid. ...Well, since our number of allies has been reduced, we'll have to withdraw for today.

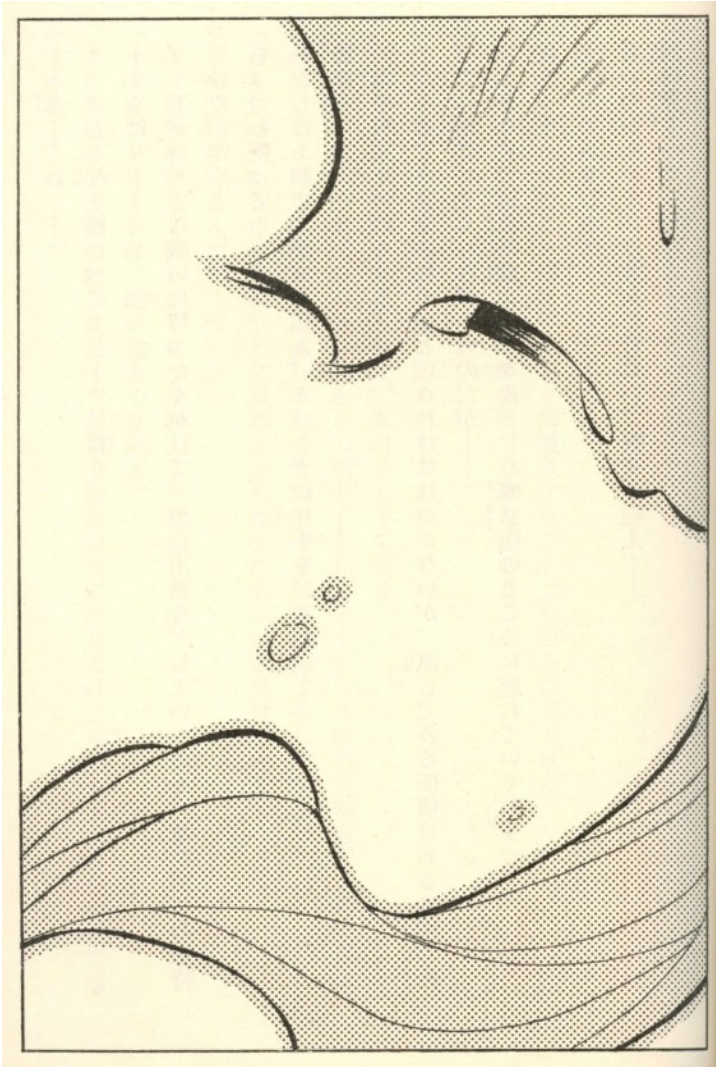
"Hey, Hey. Don't make us laugh." Luke snorted. "You think you can say that and we'll just obediently say 'sure, go ahead' and let you go?" At his most ordinary of ordinary comment, Zord snorted right back at him.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey. You really think you could follow us and defeat us? Huh? Is that okay? Well, you're probably pretty healthy but... what about the girl over there?"

Wh...?

"...What?" Luke murmured in a hoarse voice. Heartbroken. Milina dropped to her knees where she was standing.

?!



“Khahahaha! Well then! If you want to follow us, then you can follow us!” Zord and Zaikel turned away leaving only a sneer.

“Milina?!” In a panic, Luke rushed to her side. Her usually white skin was noticeably paler. Obviously, this was a case where we couldn’t chase after Zord.

“I...was careless...” She said as she clutched her side. Now that I think about it... When Zord was disguised as a thug, he dropped in front of Milina and grazed her side with his sword.

Don't tell me-?!

"Poison... right...?" Milina said, starting to sweat a little.

I thought so. Zord had been slowly prolonging the battle. By trying to get us to remember him, he was just waiting for the poison to take circulate.

"Wait a minute!" I hurriedly tried to cast a spell, holding my hand out over Milina.

"Decleary." I was trying an antidote spell. There was no way of knowing what kind of poison I needed to neutralize, but it was worth a try. It would be nice if this was effective but... "In the end, this a medical emergency. This is the exact time where we would need a healer with us!"

"Hey! Hang in there, Milina!" Luke said as he carried her on his back, and began casting a spell. "Ray Wing!" With a wind spell, they took off into the sky.

"You don't have any healers?!"

At the woman's words, Luke voice spiked with the rage. We were at a healing clinic in the south end of the city.

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Th-They're on dispatch to their own temples!" The woman said, overpowered by Luke's vigor. "The healers in this city are deployed from the temples! Because of all the fighting between the high priests, for some reason they were all

called back to their respective branches! I'm only here to disperse medicinal herbs for minor illnesses so--"

"So they're at the temples!" Without listening to the end of her explanation, Luke went running off again, Milina breathing lightly on his back. Just as I thought, we weren't fortunate enough that normal healing spells would be useful against the poison Zord used.

"But there should be one here!" Luke's voice was already practically a scream. We were at the temple of Airlord Rangort in the south side of the city. We told them we had someone who had taken on poison, and we asked to quickly see a healer. The mercenary on watch went inside for a moment. When he returned, his answer was-- They didn't have anyone like that here.

"I came here because I was told someone would be here! There's no reason someone like that wouldn't be here!"

"That's what I was told." The mercenary smiled as if he was scoffing and continued, "Our high priest said there was no one like that here. You don't believe me? Oh, that's right. He also said, since you work for the north temple, couldn't you just get Kereth to heal you? Well, that's just his opinion."

"Bastard!"

"Luke!"

Luke rushed at them, but I stopped him.

“Shouting at them won’t solve anything. You might be able to get them to drag out their healer if you defeat them all, but they’d probably cut corners in their treatment. So what do you want to do?” Luke was silent for a moment.

“Let’s head for the North temple.”

From the window, all sorts of green trees rustled as the wind crossed over them. So calm... Such a calm afternoon...

“Is there anything... they can do for us?”

We were at a room in the North temple. Lying on a bed, Milina spoke in a quiet voice.

As if she wasn’t speaking at all.

Gourry and I, along with High Priest Kereth had left the room. Deep anguish was carved into the high priest’s face.

Why couldn’t you get all of the poison out? Why couldn’t you use Recovery?

As Luke criticized him, the High Priest Kereth could only continue with,

I’m sorry.

That was all.

As we left the room, the door closed and I saw Milina lying on the bed, reaching out to touch Luke’s cheek.

When the door opened, Luke wasn't there. The window had been opened and the curtain rustled in the breeze.

I saw Milina lying on the bed quietly, as if she were asleep.

Two days had passed since Luke disappeared. Of course that didn't mean we hadn't been doing anything. We continued going around gathering information and looking for Zord and the other one- Zaikel, who had run away. I didn't think their allies would foolishly give up their information, but we'd seen their faces. This would still make the search easy. And so, evening fell. The name of a one-man information shop had come up. -And until it did, I can't even remember how many thugs I had to beat up, but that doesn't really matter now. Gourry and I ascended the stairs of the cheap apartment where the informant lived.

"-?!"

Arriving in the dim hallway, we both stopped.

Various smells mingled into the old, dirty hallway. Among all of the foul smells, was a fresh one. Spilled blood. There was one door facing the hallway, left slightly open. That's where we were headed, the informant's room.

We started running at the same time, the two of us barging into the room. Inside, there was a single man covered in blood. He was lying there. Our information shop had a problem. His body had been cut up. But he was still breathing.

“H-Hee...” when he saw us the man spoke up.

“St... please... stop... didn’t I say... where they were...?”

...!

At that moment I started to understand just what the hell had happened there.

“Could you tell me where Zord and Zaikel are? *One more time?*”

“Th-They went west... toward Sea Flower Pavilion... didn’t I tell you...?” He said almost crying. He hadn’t realized that his opponent had changed.

“Understood. We’ll call someone for you.” Gourry and I descended the stairs and bribed the manager with a gold coin and asked him to call for a healer, then headed for the place we heard from the information shop.

“What’s going on, Lina?”

“*Luke was here.*” I answered Gourry with my face stiff. There’s no doubt the reason he disappeared was for revenge. These past two days he’s been gathering news, and he arrived at this place one step ahead of us. For now we’ll find this Sea Flower Pavilion and–

Searching was unnecessary.

KABOOM!

Suddenly, light and sound scattered as a building in our path exploded.

There! We dashed hurriedly in that direction. Astonished neighbors peeked around. The building was a fountain of flames, flaring up. Lying in the street before it, mixed in with the burning splinters, there was a cheap copper signboard with some sort of flower engraved on it.

I knew this was it... that means...

“Over there!” Gourry said and started running. The people in the area were surprised and afraid. Impatient and screaming. The heat from the fire and the sound of it popping. Among all sorts of sounds and emotions mixed in with all the chaos, only one stood out. I didn’t really understand but it came flowing from one direction. It was... *Hatred.*

What was probably over there, was the source of it, where Luke was. We headed toward the flames. It seemed the fight was going on behind this inn. Gourry turned a corner and entered an alleyway. We went running through the narrow street and suddenly emerged in a spacious area. Among a jumbled row of buildings, there was a wide open space. We could see the burning inn nearby. There, something was lying on the ground. Long things. Short things. A large mass. Something round.

“...!”

Gourry and I were at a loss for words. Without a doubt.

They were body parts.

There was a scar on the round one. Zaikel.

At that time I noticed someone there.

“Gah- Gyaaaahh!” Accompanied by a shriek, something dropped from the edge of the clearing.

A leg.

...?!

Gourry and I looked up. On the roof of a building facing the clearing, the flames roaring behind him, he was there, transformed into a black silhouette. He was crouching down and it looked like he was holding something in his hand. His other arm moved. The blade he held glared orange.

“G-Gyaaaaghbaaahh!” Whatever he was holding writhed and shrieked.

Plop.

Something dropped into the clearing. But I didn't even feel like checking what it was.

“Who was it?” The one holding the other asked quietly as his hands moved. It was Luke's voice. “Who hired you?”

“B-But... I told you... didn't I...?! In the east... Francis...”

“I can't hear you very well.” Luke said calmly as his arm moved again. And then Zord screamed.

“Who was it? Who hired you?”

“P... Please stop...”

“Hey. Answer my question.”

And once again, a sword flash and Zord's shriek. And then very slightly, Zord's body started wriggling as he cried, "It was Francis! FrancisFrancisBranshissStobStobStob!!!!

"Hey. You're getting kinda noisy." Luke said as his hand-

"Luuuuuuuuuke!" I finally cried out. It took a long time before I could snap out of my petrification. Slowly... He turned toward us. A quiet light lurked in his eyes.



"Oh. It's you guys. Don't worry. I'll end this soon." He spoke as if he was just chatting with us. His right hand moved.

"Sht- STOPSTOP!" There was a small wet sound. With that, Zord couldn't say anything else.

“This is what you’ve been doing til now? How many are dead because of you? Huh?”

Slowly.

He stood up on the roof, flinging a splintered piece of debris into the flames.

“I’m going to settle things in a little while. In order to do that... I want you two to leave the city. I say that because... I don’t really want to show you the rest.” As he said it, he turned and vanished from the roof.

I didn’t follow him.

No. I couldn’t even move.

All this time, Luke’s despair must have been so deep. Hatred like this must be sleeping within everyone. Grief, dread, these are things I really haven’t known.

I feel... sick.

“Lina...” Gourry said quietly. “Lina... Are you okay...?”

I’m okay.

But instead of an answer, all that came out was sobbing. I nodded my head up and down a little.

“Luke... We have to stop him...”

“I know.”

Eventually I was able to reply to Gourry. And so the two of us turned and ran. Toward the East temple. To stop Luke.

The Blood of Priests Spills at Dusk

Standing in the sunset, the temple of Vrabazard appeared to give off a blood-colored glow. It hadn't changed from when we were there before. There were still ruffians hanging around in front of it and it seemed like there still hadn't been any sort of disturbance there. Gourry and I walked straight ahead toward the entryway.

"Hey, wait you two! Er... you're the ones hired by the sorcerer's Guild... What do you- Hey, Wait!" One of the thugs yelled at us, but we didn't slow our pace. I only shot a glance at him.

"Someone's after the High Priest Francis' life. Let us see him."

"Wh...?" Rendered speechless, the thug entered the branch behind us. I already knew the building's interior, so we headed straight ahead, for the high priest's room.

Bang! The door opened wide. Inside the room was the High Priest Francis and four men who appeared to be mercenaries.

"Wh-" The high priest hovered above his chair as the guards became riled up. "What's this all of a sudden?! What on earth-"

"Zord and Zaikel are dead." I said firmly, without letting him finish what he was saying. With only that, Francis froze.

"You know what that means... don't you?"

“Ah....” he whispered in a hoarse voice. Francis sunk back down into his chair.

The soldiers, not really comprehending the situation, gripped the handles of their swords, as they all mutually exchanged glances.

“I...” Francis, with a miserable look, weakly shook his head side to side. “It’s... not my fault...”

“Don’t screw around!” Gourry roared and Francis’ body shivered. The guards gripped their swords a bit tighter. “Do you know how many are dead?! How many people do you think the assassins you hired killed?!” At those words the soldiers stopped moving entirely. Naturally. They shouldn’t have heard anything about Francis hiring assassins.

“You’re the one who killed Head Priest Joshua in the fire.”

“No... wrong... that’s wrong... listen to me...” He held his head in both hands and shook it side to side as he he said weakly, “I had... a vision.”

“Huh?” I automatically scowled. A vision...? Wait... why is he bringing this up all of a sudden?

“When Lord Joshua. Was lost to the fire... I lost my spiritual support. Why a good man like him? Why fire? I prayed to the gods I believed in... to the great Ceiphied... to the great Vrabazard... And that night... I heard a voice.”

“A voice?”

“It came to my ears as I prayed. Yes... it was certainly the divine voice of god. *The head priest's death was no accident- An assassination by one of wicked heart- And whoever it was desired for this city to fall into a maelstrom of chaos- They'll aim for you too- You'll need power to protect yourself- gather that power and-* I heard it! The voice of god!”

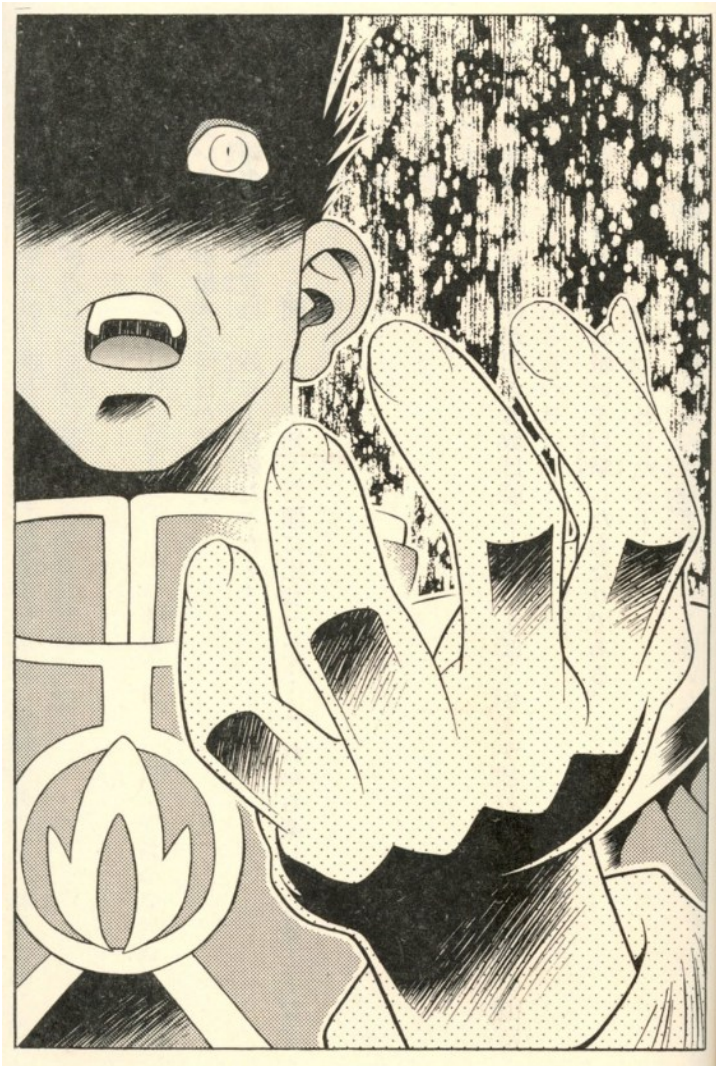
“...That's ridiculous...” He didn't seem to hear me. At least, he continued talking without it bothering him.

“That's why I hired people... If the one who murdered the head priest was among the other high priests, I was going to denounce him. *I know what you did. I won't lose to you. Someday the evil deeds you accumulated will come to light.* Originally, the ones I hired were hot-blooded men who boasted of their power. But... The other high priests started hiring people... There was nothing I could do about it, so next I hired mercenaries. If the man who murdered our head priest was among them, I couldn't lose to him... And then everyone hired mercenaries... I... against my better judgement... hired an assassin by the name of Zord...” as he said it his expression was colored with deep regret and affliction.

“And then... you ordered him to assassinate the high priest of the west, Brahn.”

“No!” At that he looked up and raised his voice at me. “I didn't order for anything like that! I told them to impede the other high priests movements! If the mercenaries they hired

were injured, they'd be forced to withdraw! That was all! But that man- The man named Zord acted of his own will!"



"You think we'll believe something like that?"

"It's true!" he cried. "Some days before the incident with Brahn... When Zord came in with the evening report, he was in an oddly good mood. I asked him what was going on and he said something like... he was happy... because he ran into someone he knew... it couldn't be... that was..."

Someone he knew... Wh-! It can't be! A few days before High Priest Brahn was assassinated... That was around the time we came to this city. On the outskirts of town we witnessed a fight between a warrior and an assassin. If that guy was Zord...

"I was told Brahn was attacked by a number of assassins, but the only one I hired was Zord! That's why I thought it was done by someone else! But that night, Zord was smiling as he said... *This is what you wanted, isn't it? I brought some of my friends together especially for this...* But that's wrong! I... I never wanted this! All I wanted...!" He covered his face with both hands.

So that's how it is. When Zord saw our faces, he probably decided not to fight two-against-one and withdrew. But even though he retreated, his desire for revenge didn't disappear. Zord wasn't running wild by disobeying orders and gathering comrades. That was all to drag out the duration of our fight. And then... Milina...

"I didn't order those things..." he spoke in a small voice, hanging his head and covering his face. And then as if he knew what I was going to say, "I didn't want Brahn to die... It... wasn't my fault..."

"So you were thinking selfishly." Suddenly, there was a voice.

Luke's voice.

That moment, Francis' entire body was wrapped in darkness

No one knew what had just happened. We all went stiff. There was an awful cracking sound and-

"GAAAAAHHH!!" Francis' screams rang out.

Without understanding the situation, I stood there dumbfounded. Luke had attacked Francis. I knew that much. But... the darkness that swallowed him and the sound of something being smashed... That's it!

"Luke!" I screamed and dashed forward, climbing over the desk, and heading into the darkness that lurked there.

"Lina!" Gourry hurriedly followed after me. I plunged into the darkness-

And slipped right out. There, was an orange colored world. Trimmed bushes, a stretch of stone pavement, a small fountain, stone statues... And everything was colored madder red.

"Lina..." Continuing after me, Gourry emerged through the hole in the wall and looked around at the scenery.

"Probably the courtyard." I said. The high priest's room faced the courtyard. A number of bodyguards and priests were collapsed all around. Either they had lost consciousness or their lives. I wasn't sure. But I finally understood what had happened.

A Dark Mist spell. It's a spell that produces a black fog which wraps around a fixed space and blocks the target's view. Luke had used it from the other side of the wall, swallowed Francis in it, and made it so we wouldn't be able to know what was going on. Then he used a different spell to break the wall and drag Francis outside.

And so, with the light of sunset behind them, Francis and Luke stood atop the arch of the covered passageway.

"So you followed... I expected that. Because it's you two... I thought you'd follow me." There was a strained laugh in his voice. Right now, shadows formed on his face in such a way that I really couldn't see it. He held Francis in his arms, limp, with his head hung.

"Luke! Please, stop this! That man only hired Zord! He didn't order him to do any of this!"

"Yeah. I know. I heard through the wall. I understand the gist of things. That's why this one won't suffer as much as Zord did."

Wha...?!

Francis' body slipped from his hands. From the edge of the roof, he tumbled to the ground.

"It's been a long time..." Luke said, his voice distant. "I used to do things like this... killing people for money... that was my trade. When I met Milina, because of her, I washed my hands of all that. ...I just had to go and remember that... damn..."

“Luke... everything’s fine now...” I said.

“No... not yet.” He silently shook his head.

“Luke!”

“Don’t get in my way. Well, it’s useless to say that to you. You two are always meddling...”

“You’re wrong!”

“I don’t think I’m right. I don’t even think I’m doing this to please Milina... but if I don’t do this...” Luke cut himself off. He was silent for a moment, as he was covered by the wind sweeping across the twilight.

“W-What the hell?!”

“There he is! Over there!” From behind me I heard the voices of guards who had finally come crawling out of the hole in the wall. Taking that as his queue, Luke turned around.

“Luke!” At my voice, he only looked over his shoulder.

“Only a little longer. Don’t try and stop me... next will be... south.” with that, he went running along the roof.

“H-Hey! Follow him!”

“Wait there, you bastard!” The guards hurriedly chased after him. And I just stood there fixedly.

“Lina! After him!” Gourry urged me, but I didn’t move.

“Lina!”

“He said... not to stop him...” I said as if I was sighing. “Luke said so. He told us... not to stop him...”

“Lina...” Gourry moved so that he was directly in front of me and gripped both of my shoulders. “That’s not like you, Lina. Do you know what I heard? When Luke was talking just now he said ‘stop me.’ That’s what I heard.”

Ah...

I instinctively gulped.

That’s... right... Next will be South. Luke said that. But if he really didn’t want us to interfere, would he have told us that? If he got away while I was unprepared, and attacked the enemy he was aiming for, we wouldn’t have been able to stop him. In spite of this, he specifically acted as if he was warning us. Which means...

“I guess so...” I gave a little nod. Right now Luke is operating between two emotions. One being the peace of mind that Milina gave him, the other was intense hatred for having her snatched away from him. Somewhere between those two.

“Let’s go, Gourry.”

“Yeah.”

Following Boost, I cast another spell.

“Ray Wing!” With Gourry holding onto me, we took off with a high-speed flight spell. We headed to the southern temple, where High Priest Ryan was.

The stars twinkled as the sky darkened. The sun had already sunk beneath ground level, and a red color still remained on the west edge of the city, indicating its opposition to the faintly encroaching darkness. Night had come. That was around the time when Gourry and I arrived at the west branch.

The strongly colored branch was called a tourist attraction, but since there are never many tourists left walking around, the entrances closed at night. As we arrived here at the west shrine, the doors leading to the foyer were already closed. In front of the door there was one legitimate soldier and a man who looked like a mercenary standing watch.

“Lina Inverse and Gourry Gabriev, from the Sorcerer’s Guild.” Before they could speak up and ask our identities, I introduced us and moved closer to the two men.

“...What’s your business?” the soldier asked with a cautious look.

“We have received information that someone is aiming for High Priest Ryan’s life. Let us meet with the high priest.”

“What?!” Both the soldier and the mercenary cried out in unison.

The mercenary immediately turned pale, “U-Understood... Let me guide you-”

“Wait!” The soldier stopped him. “I need you to tell me the whole story.”

“There’s no time!”

“Just give us the details! Why are you so eager to go in!?”

“We’ve decided to protect him!”

“If it’s just to protect him, the high priest already has several people doing that already!” I understood what the soldier was trying to say. He doubted that we weren’t here to assassinate High Priest Ryan. But whatever reason we gave, he wouldn’t be in any more danger if we just went near him. Of course, when they really don’t know the situation, it’s reasonable to be this suspicious. It’s reasonable but, we can’t just say ‘oh okay’ and leave. Luke should be drawing near at this moment.

I looked around the area. My eyes stopped on a lamp near the entrance, lit with magic light. It stood maybe a bit taller than me, on a post about as thick around as my wrist, with a statue of a maiden holding a shallow bowl at the top. The light came from above the bowl. I pointed at the lamp.

“Gourry, cut that.” immediately Gourry responded by flashing his sword.

Easily, the copper post was cut diagonally, and the lamp fell into a bush. Of course, something like this can’t be done with average skill or an average sword. I looked back at the soldier.

“If we were aiming to kill the high priest, we could have cut you both down before you could even say a word. That’s how we keep the story short. But, we’re not the ones you

need to worry about. The one who's after the high priest is very strong. The high priest has many guards, but if the one coming after him was at the same level of skill as them, it wouldn't be necessary for us to come here. But if we hadn't, Ryan would surely be killed. So. What will you do?"

"I-I understand..." observing Gourry's technique and listening to my words, the soldier repeatedly nodded up and down. "B-But... I'll go with you."

"Do as you please. Well, shall we go?" with that, we left the mercenary, and Gourry and I were guided into the temple by the soldier. Looking around I could see other soldiers but unlike before, I couldn't see any priests mixed in with them.

"There aren't any priests..."

"It's dinner time. Right now High Priest Ryan is in his personal room while all the other priests should be in the dining hall having a meal." The soldier overheard me and explained. Now that I think about, it is around that time. That means...

"Hurry!"

"Huh? Uhh..."

At my command we all picked up speed until we arrived at the high priest's room. Throwing the door open wide, there were mercenaries and soldiers in front of us. There were five other people, plus the high priest Ryan. The high priest was in the midst of bringing his fork to his mouth.

“Wh-What is it? You two, aren’t you from the Sorcerer’s Guild...?”

“High Priest Ryan, someone’s after your life.”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” At my announcement, Ryan and his guards were in an uproar.

“Have you eaten any of that?”

“N-Not yet but... It can’t be-!” Shifting his focus to his fork, he tossed it away. “Poison?!” He shot a panicked glance at the tray lined with different foods. Fried white fish, steamed vegetable salad, bread with soup. The high priest’s fork had a section of fried fish on it.

“Let me check to make sure.” I said as I took the tray. Making a puzzled face, I tried each food one by one.

“Gourry, try this.”

“Right.” It was unusual for Gourry but he took a single bite. High Priest Ryan sat firmly with an anxious look.

“Hmmm...” With the same troubled face, “Okay. You were lucky. There doesn’t seem to be anything abnormal about it.”

Of course there didn’t. We got here before Luke. He wouldn’t have had time to slip poison into his meal. I just had to say something vague to get some food. And don’t tell me not to mess around. It’s just more depressing if you consider that humans’ powers are weakened when they’re

hungry. If that happened, we wouldn't be able to convince Luke to stop.

"But. It's dangerous to be in a room next to the courtyard. Someone could cast an attack spell from the outside. We should move you to a larger room. If possible, a room without windows, that doesn't face the outside... a room with few obstacles would be best." At my words Ryan instantly rose from his chair.

"U-Understood! In that case, the dining hall! Let's move to the dining hall!"

"Aren't the other priests in the middle of a meal?"

"We can just make them leave!" Ryan answered, clearly losing his self-control. "Let's go! Follow me, gentlemen!" already neglecting their meals, the soldiers and mercenaries left the room in succession. Gourry and I continued after them.

Before long we came to a spacious room with a large table at the center. With a voice like a crane, he drove out the other priests who were in the middle of their meal and ordered for the guards to straighten the table. Without explaining things very well to the priests, they all seemed irritated. Of course, that didn't concern Ryan. Well, when your life's in danger, there's not really time to notice the people around you. Once the room was tidied up, High Priest Ryan sat in a chair at the center, and breathed a single sigh.

“Now. You said that someone was after my life... Why?! What is the meaning of this?! I knew it! The one behind this is one of the other high priests! Which one?! The same one who murdered our head priest and Brahn?! How many more is he going to kill?! If he’s going to keep killing, why are we sitting in a place like this?! Shouldn’t we run?! No, maybe we should call for more soldiers! No, now that I think about it, I heard the fire was started from outside, but- Don’t tell me these events are related?!”

“Calm down. First, listen to me. Second, don’t ask any more questions.” Somehow I managed to calm him down after he snarled all these questions at me. Honestly, I was puzzled. I wondered if it was okay to tell him that Luke was the one coming after him. If I told him everything that’s happened, Ryan would suspect that Luke was doing this because Kereth was behind everything that’s happened. But if I don’t tell him, he won’t know why he’s being targeted.

“The head priest and High Priest Brahn were killed by separate people.” I said. “The one who’s targeting you has a personal grudge.”

“P-Personal Grudge?! That’s preposterous! I haven’t done anything to get on anyone’s bad side!” To say something so brazenly, without any self-awareness.

You...! I automatically raised my hand and-

SMACK!

“Kbah!” He took a fist directly to the face and fell from his chair.

“High Priest!”

“What are you doing, bastard?!”

Receiving the criticism from the guards-

“I went easy on you. You can shut up and take something like this.” The one who said that wasn’t me, but Gourry. He delivered that line, no longer able to suppress his anger.



“Wha..?! Why would you...?!” Ryan said as he clutched his face. I looked down at him.

“Two or three days ago, someone stopped by requesting an antidote, but you refused to offer a cure. Your reason was because he had been hired by High Priest Kereth. The girl who had been poisoned- couldn’t be saved. And she was very important to him. What I’m saying is, if you’ve got any complaints you’ll have to revive her. And since you have absolutely no self-awareness, I mean... Your actions have made you an indirect murderer.”

At that, the mercenaries and the soldiers turned threatening glares toward High Priest Ryan.

“Wh... that’s...! Murder...?! D-Don’t joke about that! How rude! F-For one thing, I... I don’t know anything about that!”

“The guard in charge of the door clearly gave your name. ‘High Priest Ryan said so’

“Th-That’s...! F-First of all! I’m not the one who poisoned the girl! If he wants to target someone he should target who ever dealt the poison!”

“He already killed him.” with the way I said it, without any delay, this time, Ryan was at a loss for words, frozen.

“Do you know about the fire that happened nearby? That’s where he killed him. He slowly sliced up his body, while he was still alive, and then left him to the flames.” Ryan’s knees trembled in fear. This will be a good lesson for him.

“B-But-!” He said with a look as if he was relying on me. “That means...! We’re only facing one man! Not the people who killed Brahn! If that’s how it is...! As long as I have these guards here, all I have to fear is-”

“The guys who killed Brahn or started the fire that killed the Head priest. I wonder who’s stronger...”

“Hee-!” He gulped a little.

“Th-They’ll probably... protect me... Of course! I-I... I have a promise with God to bear this city’s burdens! Not yet... I can’t die yet! You’ll protect me, won’t you? Won’t you?!”

“I don’t know about God, but if I promised anything like that I’m either not aware of it, or I was half asleep.” I said. “I have no obligation to protect people like you.”

“Th-That’s...”

“However. I want to stop the man who’s running wild. From the bottom of my heart. In order to do that, as a result, I’ll protect you.”

“A-Anything’s fine! Anyway, please save me! I-I’m begging you! I’m sincerely begging you!”

“Then be obedient. And patient.”

“U-Understood!”

This old man... I wonder if he really can stay obedient like this...

The structure of this building should be the same as the other branches. And Luke was a guard at the north temple.

In that case we should consider that Luke is familiar with the building's structure. But to be honest, between Gourry and I, when it comes to the building's structures and the relation between its locations, we really don't have any understanding. If Ryan were to carelessly move around, Luke would have the advantage in finding him. So the problem is... which direction is Luke going to come from? The room had no windows, and two exits, which were a good distance away from where Ryan was seated. But that didn't mean anything at the east temple. If we were in another room, Ryan would have to be seated away from the walls. Previously, our actions were delayed by the abrupt attack, but he won't be able to use that Dark Mist trick more than once. So if Luke wanted to attack suddenly, there were only one or two directions he could come from. That is- from above, or below.

"Is there a basement beneath this room?"

"...? No, the basement is a little further away... Would it be better if we moved there?"

"What about above this room?" I ignored him and asked my next question.

"Uh... well... That's the priests sleeping quarters but... That's it! The enemy's coming from above or below! That's how it is! Right! We'll have guards stationed in the room above! Hey! You, over there! Go out into the courtyard and find five or six men who don't look like they're doing anything and move them to the room above! That's the

priest's sleeping quarters- from room five to room seven! Got that?!"

One of the nearby soldiers received Ryan's orders and left the room. And then, there was a time of silence. All we could do is wait until Luke arrived. It felt like the time was long in a cruel way. It's like... he was late. Now, we weren't particularly looking forward to the moment where Luke would come in and kill the high priest, but from the way he acted back in the east, he should have come directly here. But oddly, too much time had passed. Or- there was the chance that he had already invaded the building.

"I-Is there really... someone coming for me...?!" No longer able to endure the silence and the suspense, Ryan leaked out an anxious question. "Is there some kind of mistake...? Maybe, it seemed like he was targeting me, but he really went after Francis in the east..."

"If that's what you think, then shouldn't your guards take care of all this?"

"O-Oh no, no! That would be a problem!" he quickly shook his head.

"Then..." I cut off my sentence. The sound of footsteps drawing near echoed in the hall.

"H-He's here!?" Ryan cried out in fear and the guards became excited. But...

"High Priest Ryan!" a single gasping priest came running into the room.

“What is it?!” Ryan automatically stood up from his chair, and the priest stumbled into a kneel.

“An emergency! Just now, there was a messenger from the east temple! A villain invaded the temple and murdered High Priest Francis!”

“What?!” Ryan cried out in shock.

“We know.” At my words, the whole room froze. “High Priest Francis was killed right in front of our eyes. And then, the one who did it told us clearly which high priest would be next. *This time will be South*. That’s what he said. That’s why we came here.”

“Th-That’s...! Then...!” He was trying to say something when...

There was a distant vibration and several voices echoing from somewhere.

“Wh-What the-?!”

“Out in the courtyard!” One of the guards reported from the hallway.

“E-Ehhh?! Take all of the guards and-”

“Stop!” I kept Ryan from reflexively handing down orders.

“Wha...?”

“It’s probably a diversion! He caused a disturbance out in the courtyard to pull attention and manpower from here. He would then strike while we’re short-handed!”

“B-But... we’re only facing one man!”

“There are a number of ways he could do it! For instance, he could create a golem and let it rampage! At any rate, we can’t act carelessly!”

“Bingo. It was a golem. As expected, you properly predicted it.”

Hearing his voice, I automatically shivered. He hadn’t said anything til now. That voice was...

“Who’s there- ugh?!” From the hallway we could hear a guard’s voice, and then without even a pause, a groan. Then, from one of the entrances, he appeared.

...Luke...

“Yo. You’re High Priest Ryan, right? I’ve come to kill you.”

A shadow went running through the room.

Gourry!

All at once, Gourry drew his sword, readied it against Luke, and shortened the distance between them, blocking Luke’s path. He’s good! Luke had only just appeared from the hallway. From his location it would be impossible to enter the room and avoid Gourry.

“This is the end of the line!”

“I knew you’d come... This is... kind of a pain. I didn’t want to deal with you two...” He said as he readied his sword, and

confronted Gourry. "In a fair, sword on sword fight, I don't have a chance against you, huh?" He gave a self-deprecating smile.

"Heeee!" I stood in front of Ryan as he screamed out.

"I'm not gonna say something cheap, like I know what you're feeling, but! I'm not going to abandon you to do rash things like this!"

"Sorry... I'm causing a lot of trouble for you guys... but... don't stop me..." Luke said as he turned his gaze toward Gourry.

Luke should know. By sword skills, he couldn't win to Gourry. Not just in skill. Each sword was high quality, but the ways in which they were lethal was different. Luke's sword could temporarily store a spell, which was an interesting feature for a magic sword that was sharp on its own.

The other- In Gourry's hands was a sword of legend, the Blast Sword. Originally, this was a sword that cut through everything indiscriminately, so we deliberately had to put a spell on it to dull the blade. That's how sharp that sword is.

If the two swords clashed, there's no mistake that Luke's sword would get cut in two. Luke should also know that, but he didn't show any sign of backing down. Even if he wasn't successful, either he didn't intend on lowering his willpower, or he had some kind of plan.

"Let's go!" Luke roared and drew his sword back. Gourry responded by brandishing his own sword. At that instant two

streaks flashed and crossed over each other.

Fwoom!

The wind howled and Gourry's sword wavered. Did Luke have a wind spell wrapped around his blade? If Gourry used his usual sword skills he could have torn the coiled gale apart. Of course, Gourry was only trying to stop Luke so his skill lacked its usual sharpness.

"-ck!"

But Gourry just struck again using the momentum of his previous swing. His target was the sword in Luke's hands.

Fwoom!

Once again, the wind howled, but Gourry continued dealing out blows. Luke stepped forward. Maintaining the distance, Gourry retreated back.

-No! I realized something in my astonishment. Gourry's skills hadn't dulled. The power of the wind around Luke's blade wasn't normal. Otherwise Gourry should have swung his sword not once, but twice. From here I could tell that Gourry wasn't using his sword to attack, but giving all of his attention to defense. In that case- predicting his next move I began casting a spell in my mouth.

More than being only able to retreat, Gourry had struck three or four times with his sword, which Luke had caught every time. With Gourry's skill, he was capable of reading the direction of the wind wrapped around the sword, slipping through, and attacking the actual body of the

sword. But that was with an average opponent. Luke couldn't compare to Gourry, but by no means was he average. If he persisted in protecting, the wind that wrapped around Luke's sword would catch Gourry's sword. Once again, I saw it and of course—

After several times, Luke's wind seized Gourry's sword.

"Burst!" Luke roared.

FWOOSHH!

The gust stored inside the sword blew out all at once.

"-!"

If it hit him directly he would have completely lost his balance. All he could do was jump back, riding the wind. At the same time, Luke kicked the ground. The moment Gourry opened the distance between them, Luke withdrew from the space, and approached Ryan, as he had planned. But I was already expecting that! Without delay I released my spell.

"Diem Wing!"

I released my gale against Gourry's back and stopped him from retreating back. Once again, the distance between them was restored.

"What?!" Luke's surprised voice—

"Ohhhh!" And Gourry's heavy war cry.

A sharp sound rang out and Luke's sword went tumbling to the floor. It hadn't been knocked away. Knowing that Gourry's Blast Sword would cut right through his own blade

the instant they met, Luke had let go of his sword. Though, striking from an imperfect stance, Gourry's attack wouldn't have cut Luke's sword very well.

"Ch!" seeing his disadvantage, Luke retreated to the hallway.

We can't afford to let him run away! If he runs now, he could come back and target Ryan again and all this would be meaningless. If we can't completely cut through his hatred- I don't know what we should do. But we need to talk to him at least a little.

"Gourry! Follow him!" I yelled as I dashed after Luke. Kicking the ground, Gourry headed out into the hallway.

Luke went rushing down the hall when darkness started to spread. Dark mist! Reflexively, Gourry stopped in his tracks. And suddenly-

As we headed toward the darkness, flames crept up around the ceiling.

"Uwaaahh!" the guards cried out in shock, but the flames only licked the ceiling. He probably saw that we were heading toward the Dark Mist and released a series of fire spells to restrain our movements. But I won't falter over something like this! Without paying it any mind, I plunged into the darkness that spread through the hall. I hadn't even gone a few steps when I reemerged into the hallway. I stopped automatically. Here and there along the walls of the corridor were sconces with magic light. But just a little

further, the blackness of the Dark Mist spell spread once again.

“Lina!” A moment later, Gourry appeared from within the darkness. We looked at each other, nodded, and continued running again. We entered the second black fog- and there was a third right ahead of us.

Urgh! So persistent! Without slowing down, we broke through the third darkness. Before us was a crossroad. In the hallway straight ahead was a fourth darkness. Doubt flitted through my head.

“Stop!” I cried as I stopped myself. A Dark Mist shell game... Up until the second time, it was obvious. But by the third time, Luke already knew we’d see through it. And the fourth time- was developed around this crossroad specifically. Of course that doesn’t mean he ran that way. If he seriously thought casting a Dark Mist spell at a crossroads would shake us, it’s needless to say, going to the side would be most effective for him. Nevertheless, it’s this kind of thing where he’s either misleading us, or he’s outsmarting us by making us think he’s misleading us and he did run that way, or... it can’t be!

“We’re going back Gourry!” I said as I turned and ran back into the darkness.

“Right!” He answered and followed after me. We went back running through the same number of dark masses.

“Uwaaahhh!” As we suddenly emerged, the guards cried out in surprise.

“Get a hold of yourselves!” I scolded them and quickly surveyed the room. The chair at the center of the room had no one in it.

“Where’s the high priest?!”

“H-He took some of the guards with him and ran the other way.” One of the guards answered me.

—*Shit!*

I didn’t realize Luke’s plan until I finally got here! Those flames near the ceiling weren’t for the sake of blocking Gourry and I’s movements. It was to smoke Ryan out of the room. His simultaneous retreat was to lure Gourry and I away. So then while we were puzzling over his Dark Mist tricks, he took a different path and got ahead of us so he could target Ryan directly. The reason it took him so long to get here from the Eastern branch was probably because if we had time to explain the situation to Ryan it would magnify his fear. Gourry and I dashed through the room and headed toward the other exit. Just as we did—

Crash!

At the edge of the path we were heading for, the ceiling collapsed with a roar.

“I-It’s all over!” Ryan’s scream was layered over a crushing sound.

This is bad!

The two of us took off into the passage anyway. The dust hadn't settled but this wasn't a time where we could worry about that. We tread over the piles of rubble that stretched on forever. Ryan's guards had been following him. Around us, there were four or five mercenaries and soldiers lying on the ground. But Luke and Ryan weren't around.

Where are they?! If I searched for a presence, in a far off place, I could hear a commotion of people and the sound of a fight. There? No, wrong, that's the courtyard-

"...ahh...." Mixed in with the distant commotion, there was the distant, unmistakable voice of High Priest Ryan.

"Over here!" Gourry said and went running. I followed after him. Leaving the hallway and turning around a corner, we headed toward the rear garden. Normally there would be soldiers on guard around here but, they must have already run out to the courtyard because I couldn't see any. We ran down another hallway. Bam! I practically rammed into the partially open door. There, the stillness of night governed the space. There were garden lamps here and there tossing a gentle magic light over the area. Pruned, thoroughly maintained greenery. Bronze statues which had been transformed into shadows. From the direction of the courtyard, I could still hear the sounds of a battle. As I thought, most of the guards had gathered there. Here, they were already a number of bodies collapsed on the ground, with Luke standing silently in the middle of it all.

"I really don't understand..." Luke spoke silently. Footprints led up to a black mass- looking down at High Priest Ryan.

...gh!

"Humans... There was a time when I thought if they did things recklessly, stubbornly.... then they'd die easily..."

We couldn't stop him.

I ground my back molars.

"Fighting Mazoku... How many times did I think we absolutely couldn't do it...? But on that journey... somehow, we survived... we won... That should have... Zord, some second rate bastard... Milina... I can't believe it... I actually... it's so weird... really..."

"...Luke..."

"This guy died easily too... his screaming was so annoying... I severed his vocal chords. If I avoided the blood vessels, he wouldn't die, but... it happened so suddenly... from shock. This guy... I was planning on really tormenting him..."

"Luke..."

"It's no good... It's still no good..."

"...what?" Luke's words sent a cold chill down my back. Lurking within him, it felt like the hatred still hadn't dissipated.

“If I kill him it will all be over. Everything will come to an end... after that happens, they can arrest me or kill me, I don’t care... anything’s fine... Milina’s not here anymore anyway... That’s what I thought but... that’s not right... after that, and after that...they keep bursting out from within my heart... those black words. ...Filling my chest...! Still... Kereth and his priests, just had to use one more spell...! They could have just used Resurrection but they said Milina couldn’t be saved...!”

“Luke!” I yelled out.

Certainly Kereth and his healers weren’t able to completely remove the poison from Milina. There was no one there who could use Resurrection. But more than Zord using a poison that an average antidote spell couldn’t cure, by the time we got to the north temple the poison had circulated through Milina’s body, and her strength was exhausted. Certainly, if they had been able to remove all of the poison, she might have recovered. If someone had been there who could use Resurrection, a spell that heals by gradually drawing energy from others in the area, her health would have gone back to normal and her body could have fought the rest of the poison, and she might have won. But that’s...



“I know! I’m taking my rage out on them! That this is just an excuse! In my mind I know all that! Still...! Still, my heart must...! You don’t understand!”

“It *is* just an excuse, Luke!”

“Next will be the north temple...”

Gourry’s word’s couldn’t reach Luke’s heart.

“Stop it, Luke! If you continue this way, the hate that you feel in your heart will just continue to spread! Once you kill Kereth... next you’ll start to blame us. And if you kill us, then

you'll blame someone else after that. And then in the very end, you'll only have yourself to blame! If you abandon yourself to your hatred, if you wipe out this city, it won't fill your heart!"

"Then... what would you do? All you're doing is saying to get a hold of my emotions but... what would you do if you were in the same position...? What would you do if your own companion was killed by some jackass? If you were told to cast aside your hate, would you cast it aside? If you were told to stop because it was all in vain, would you understand and just stop?"

"."

I didn't have an answer for Luke's question.

Slowly.

Luke turned around.

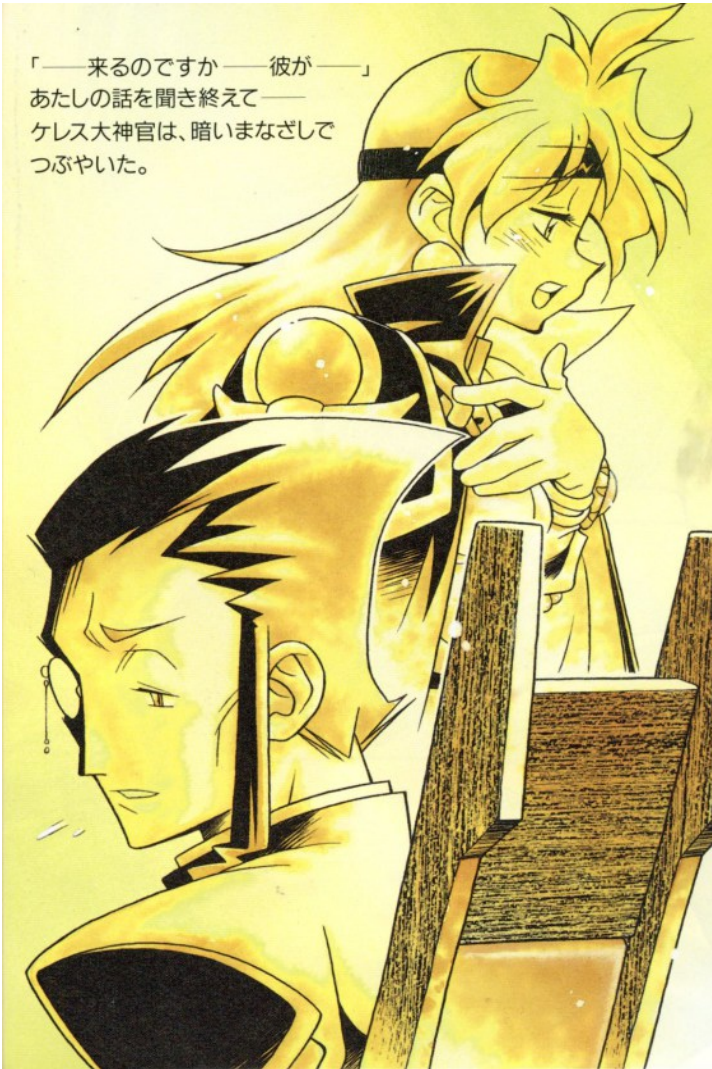
"It'll be over... Next, it will all be over...!"

"Luke!" When I called out-

He released his spell and his voice spread away. And then, Luke took off into the air. To the North, to High Priest Kereth.

The Darkness Concealed Within Everyone

“...So he’s coming...” High Priest Kereth said with a dark expression after he had finished listening to my story.



We were at the shrine of Aqualord, in Kereth’s personal room. This was after Luke had left the south temple. There was still a commotion out in the courtyard, but we left that to the actual soldiers while Gourry and I chased after—no,

tried to chase after Luke. However, even using Boost with a flight spell, we couldn't see where Luke was at all. Not being able to help that, we came directly to this temple and explained the situation to High Priest Kereth, including the part where Kereth was being targeted.

"He's... running wild... but at the same time, something's holding him back. To exemplify that, he left before us, but he still hasn't arrived. But at any cost, we'll stop him."

"Understood." Kereth nodded up and down. "I will also do whatever I can to help out."

"Please do." I said and lowered my head. "Then, for the place we'll be guarding you from--"

"About that, I have a request." He interrupted me. "I'd like for it to be in the chapel."

"The chapel...?" At his suggestion, I knit my eyebrows.

The most suitable place for bodyguarding would be somewhere where an assailant couldn't suddenly attack, but would be easy to escape from. In addition, considering the possibility of a fight, a larger space would be nice. I won't complain since the chapel is a large space, so at least we can gather guards there. But... in the chapel there were a ton of pillars and pews for the worshipers and altars and all sorts of other obstacles. There were a lot of places where someone could hide while approaching us. Or someone could attack by smashing through the stained glass on the

ceiling. In short, it was hard to say if this was a suitable place or not.

“Hmm...” I made a difficult face and Kereth immediately looked straight at me.

“Please. I feel like that’s the place where I belong... whatever result comes of it...” Those are the words of a man who has resigned himself to death. Going so far as to say that, he was no longer opposed to it.

“...Understood.” I said without a nod of agreement. “Then, for the guards-”

“About that too... I have a suggestion.” Once again, he interrupted. And of course, his idea was unconventional.

The walls and pillars were outfitted with sconces forged with the image of a maiden and lit with bright magical light which illuminated the wide space. Between the rows of pews stretched an indigo carpet with an emerald green pattern woven into it. Centered at the end of a wide aisle was an altar to Aqualord. At that altar was positioned High Priest Kereth. Supporting him on both sides was Gourry, on the right, and I on the left. We were the only ones in the chapel. The other soldiers and mercenaries were elsewhere within the branch.

Gourry and I were the only guards.

That was High Priest Kereth’s ridiculous idea that he was so confident in. Of course, I was against it. We would be way

too defenseless. But that's what he said, that this was something we needed to settle on our own, that we didn't need to get the mercenaries involved. Well, that's for sure. It's a bit harsh to say, but even if we had a mountain of soldiers and mercenaries, I don't think they could stop Luke. No, apart from that, if any of them approached Luke to reprimand him, he'd snatch away any chance for discussion. So even the preferred method wasn't very good. Eventually Gourry and I agreed to his plan. But of course, the mercenaries, regular soldiers, and priests didn't. So we lied to them saying that Kereth would be giving an admonitory speech and gathered them all in an inner room. With my Sleeping spell we put them all to bed. This way, if we make a little noise, we shouldn't be bothered.

"Understand, Gourry?"

"Yeah... if he doesn't back down... get serious. I guess..."
At my question, Gourry nodded with a hard expression.

Until now, compared to High Priests Francis and Ryan, the two of us had been more sympathetic to Luke, who we were closer with. But this time, things were different. That's why, even if we have to hurt Luke, we need to stop him. Thinking back to the showdown with Luke in the south, though unintentionally, we didn't hurt our opponent, and our opponent didn't hurt us. Those were the conditions of the fight. As a result... High Priest Ryan was killed. That's why this time...

"We'll stop him. Absolutely." I whispered.

Then, just as if we were waiting for it, the sound of footsteps echoed. Distant... and somehow near. With a heavy sound, the chapel doors opened.

“Hey. I guess I made you wait.” he said, illuminated by the glow of the magic lights, with that quiet, unchanging expression.

Luke.

“On the way here, I had to go back south and pick up my sword. But this is a pretty tasteful reception from you guys.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but no unnecessary burdens will be entering.”

“Yeah... that’s fine...”

“So... you won’t stop?”

“That’s my intent. This is where it ends.”

“Luke...” I said with a sigh. “What... did Milina say to you?”

“-gh!” Luke averted his eyes and bit his lip.

“After we left the room... when it was just the two of you... What did she say? Milina, to you. Did she tell you to avenge her? Did she tell you to kill the priests? Or...?”

“What Milina said is none of your business!” he interrupted me. It was practically a scream.

“You...! What the hell do you know about what I’m going through?! How can you even understand...?! This is my problem!”

...Haaahhhh... Luke took a deep sigh.

"It doesn't matter what I say. Let's keep this simple. The point is whether or not you guys can stop me."

"I know." I nodded.

There was no other way. I knew this was all a mistake. Luke knew that too. He just couldn't stop the hatred that was coming from deep within his heart. That's why there was probably only one method for doing this- Gourry and I had to stop him.

"This time... we're going to stop you. We won't hold back." I said with a wry smile.

"I know. Me too. Depending on how things go, I might have one or two things to match your skills." Luke returned a wry smile and drew his sword. And so, illuminated by the magic lights, under the watch of the saints in the stained glass, Luke confronted us.

Luke kicked the floor, running swiftly between the benches, he was coming right toward us.

Amazingly, as if he was protecting Kereth, Gourry jumped out in front of the altar and drew his sword. I began reciting a spell. Luke was closing in on us.

"Abyss Flare!" Luke released a spell that I didn't even know. In that instant, fwoom! The carpet right in front of us was set ablaze. Concealing Luke's form as he proceeded

toward us, the flames licked at the carpet. Gourry had his sword prepared in front of him, but I had anticipated that Luke would use some kind of spell as a diversion.

“Diem Wing!” I released my strong wind spell toward the flames that were approaching. But the flames didn’t disperse. Magic Fire?! Predicting that I would counter with a wind spell, he used a fire spell that I couldn’t defend against. Well, in that case...!

“Gourry! Cut it!”

“Right!”

Usually that would be an unreasonable demand, but in response to my request, Gourry slashed through the convulsing flames with his sword, dividing the fire and sending it scattering away. The Blast Sword is also a sword that can cut through magic, so it should be able to cut through magic fire. That’s what I was thinking. But at the same time that he cut them down, Luke came dashing out from within the blaze as it vanished. With the sword in his right hand, he slashed downward at Gourry.

“-gh!” turning his sword, Gourry caught it. Instantly, the space in front of his sword blurred. Once again, a gale had wrapped around his blade. However!

“Ohhh!” With a battlecry, Luke’s sword was cut in two. Seeing through the invisible wind, Gourry sent out a strike that cut through the sword. He did it! Or so I thought. Luke’s left hand moved and another sword appeared.

“Burst!” with Luke’s voice, the wind wrapped around that sword was released.

“-gh!” Gourry’s body was set adrift by the wind. Without paying it any mind, Luke tossed away the sword in his right hand and headed for the altar. Toward Kereth!

But I’m still here! I ran toward the high priest, grabbed his hand and pulled him toward me while casting my spell. Kicking off the altar, Luke jumped through the air toward us. Just then, Gourry had corrected his stance and forced his way through.

“Diem Wing!” Luke released his gust downward.

“-?!”

The wind caused Gourry to stagger and changed the course of Luke’s drop. As he landed, he drew a black dagger from his lower back. Driving it towards Gourry-

“Darkness, embrace!” A black fog appeared around where Gourry was. Dark Mist?! He could do it with his second sword, and he could do it with this dagger. There’s no mistake, Luke knew how to store spells within weapons. He can do that?! Previously, Luke lived in the underworld. That’s what he said. Is that when he learned these techniques?

Gourry reflexively jumped back, opening the distance between them. In that interval, Luke came plunging toward me.

“Ray Wing!” I released my spell and High Priest Kereth and I went whirling into the air wrapped in a barrier of wind. I used my talismans to cast a Boost spell. This way, the wind barrier that surrounded us couldn’t be worn out by something light. It was a hard spell to control, but this chapel was a big enough space that we could fly around in it. I temporarily flew to the back of the chapel then made a u-turn. Now I was heading straight for Luke, and I could strike him head on! Luke didn’t dodge it. He only returned his sword to its scabbard and held out his free left hand. Don’t tell me he’s going to try and tear through our barrier?! Or is he just bluffing?!

I’m gonna go with bluffing.

Without paying him any mind, I continued plunging straight toward Luke. But the moment we made contact, Luke’s mouth moved and the wind warped.

Wha...?!

The encircling wind barrier fluctuated, there was a furious disruption all around us, and it was torn apart. Losing our barrier, the high priest and I tumbled to the floor. However, Luke was also blown away by the collision.

I get it! I figured out what the hell Luke had just done. The moment he made contact with the barrier with his left hand, he cast some kind of wind spell. Used against the wind barrier, the two spells interfered with each other. The power of the interference was much stronger on my side because I had cast Boost. But since the spell was already difficult to

control, that interference combined with an unstable spell—in other words, when it was hit with Luke’s spell, the barrier’s balance crumbled and the spell broke down. By understanding the spell’s unique characteristics, he was able to tear through the barrier. Of course he could do something like that! But somehow Kereth and I were able to come out of it still standing —er, landing. With the shock from the crash, my body hurt all over, but I didn’t have time to just lay around in pain. Luke who had been temporarily blown away, was already standing again. There, Gourry plunged at him from behind.

“Stop being so bitter!” Gourry yelled and flashed his sword.

“I’m not bitter!” Luke yelled drawing another dagger, releasing the wind spell stored inside its blade. Was he going to blow Gourry away again?! But, in the middle of his full power charge, Gourry jumped to the side and avoided the wind that rushed toward him. Luke threw his dagger, aiming for the spot where Gourry would land. Of course he couldn’t avoid that. Gourry had no other choice but to repel the dagger with his sword. At that moment Luke went into a two-handed spring toward Gourry.

“What?!” For a moment, Gourry faltered. If this had been an enemy he needed to defeat, there’s no doubt he would have bisected him in midair. But Luke was an opponent he only needed to stop. That moment of hesitation delayed his reaction time.

“-gh!”

Luke’s feet sunk into Gourry’s gut. Gourry staggered. Luke landed. Without even looking at Gourry, Luke turned and dashed toward us. I didn’t have time to cast a spell. Could my swordsmanship stop Luke?

The answer was no.

There was only one method we could use.

“Over here!” I said as I pulled Kereth’s hand and went running. I cast a spell in my mouth. We were heading for a corner of the chapel. Our movement was only to put some distance between us and Luke, since we couldn’t just escape to the back of the room. Without hesitating, I ran down the aisle. This should buy me some time to complete my spell, since we can’t just wait for Gourry to pursue Luke. Of course, Luke followed after us, gradually closing the distance. Luke was casting some kind of spell– But mine was completed before his. Placing one hand against the wall, I released my spell.

“Van Rail!”



With my hand as its starting point, frozen ivy crept along the wall. This way, if the opponent came in contact with it, they'd be frozen in place. He couldn't avoid being frostbitten. As the ice drew near his feet, Luke jumped.

"Ray Wing!" Luke cast the high-speed flight spell in midair. Since the ice missed Luke, it continued along the wall toward Gourry. Of course, Gourry wouldn't eat something like this directly.

"Hah!" brandishing the Blast Sword, Gourry was able to scatter the ice entirely. And so Luke came after us, ready to

strike from behind. We couldn't endure a hit like that! I immediately dropped to the floor, pulling High Priest Kereth down with me. This way, Luke would pass over our heads and charge down the aisle alone- at least he should have. I was a little late pulling Kereth down and his ceremonial robes got caught in the wind barrier, dragging him along. And of course since he was holding onto me, I went with him.

“Waaaagh!?”

We were dragged like that all the way to the exit. Of course, this was a miscalculation for Luke too. There were now two extra people being dragged along by a spell that was already unstable. Just as we left the aisle, the spell lost balance and we crashed. At that time, I grabbed Kereth's hand and went running down the side corridor. I could feel Luke's presence following behind us. While chanting a spell, I found a narrow pathway and changed course. He was able to avoid my Van Rail by flying over it, so then how's this?! I released a spell behind us.

“Freeze Brid!” The cold spell I released, crashed into the wall behind us and left more than half of the passageway encased in ice. That should stop him! In that time, Gourry should be able to follow- I looked over my shoulder.

Instantly. Along with a sharp sound, some of the ice I had formed was cracking and falling to the ground. Are you kidding?! He can cut through ice?! As if he was barely turning a regular-sized sword, he must have cut a mass of

ice from the narrow path or- Did he have a sword charged with a fire spell already prepared?! But while he was wielding his sword, Gourry approached him from behind.

“Luuuuuke!”

Looking back, Luke kicked some chunks of ice near his feet toward Gourry. Even though he had cut it apart, there was still a mass about the size of a fist among the pieces. If he got hit with something like that, it wouldn't be fixed with just an apology. There was no way to avoid it in the narrow path. Gourry gave the sword a small swing, but only knocked down the large mass of ice. That instant- Ice started to spread from the core of Gourry's Blast Sword.

“!!!”

He hurriedly dropped his sword. From the handle to the blade it was completely covered in ice. If Gourry had let go of it a moment later, his hands would have been frozen. What Luke did just now- I honestly have no idea what it was. He kicked some ice, including a large piece, and somehow combined it with a Freeze Brid spell... Anyway, this way, Gourry lost his weapon. And I don't think Luke was going to wait for it to thaw.

And then, Luke kicked the ground, aiming for Gourry! Had he already been planning on preventing Gourry from attacking? Throwing his sword and dagger to the ground, he challenged him to hand-to-hand combat. From his dash, he threw a feint with his left fist, ducked down, and went for a palm strike directed at the pit of the stomach. Gourry

warped his body to avoid the left fist, then swept away the right attack with his right hand, stepping forward and countering with his right elbow. But Luke, while turning his body, grabbed Gourry's right wrist with his right hand and then went to sweep out his right leg. Wrapping around Gourry, he could take him down by collapsing backward onto him, at least that was the position he was taking. But that moment, Gourry sunk his left fist into Luke's back.

"gh!?" Gourry was somehow able to strike from such an unstable position. It wasn't very effective, but Luke had lost his balance. Separating himself from Luke, Gourry threw a flying kick. Luke took the blow to his side. That should be effective on its own! But- At that moment, Luke grabbed Gourry's leg with his left arm.

"Raaahh!" As if he was repelling it away, he forced his leg against the wall. "Ray Freeze!" The cold spell left Gourry's leg covered in ice, clinging to the wall.

"-ck!!" a regretful groan leaked out. But by grabbing Gourry's leg, the palm of Luke's own hand was also frozen to the ice.

"OOORRRRAAAAAHHH!" And with a scream, he forcibly pulled them apart. There was an unpleasant sound of tearing rawhide, and blood splattered over the area. The shape of a red hand print was left in the ice. Without paying any mind to the skin that would be pulled from his hand, Luke had just torn it away.

“...how much...” beside me, High Priest Kereth murmured in terror.

How much... how much longer... Did that mean how long until he killed Kereth? Up until now his hatred had been deep. Somber thoughts were growing in his heart. Luke turned around. Gourry couldn't move from where he was. As Luke looked toward us, he pulled a dagger from his lower back.

Oh yeah?! In that case-!

“Flare Arrow!” I released my spell.

“Useless!” Luke shouted as he swung his dagger. He created a gale which blew against me and scattered the flames I had released.

Bastard! How many magic charged weapons does he have?! If this is how it is, all we can do for now is run! If we take some kind of detour we can return to where Gourry is once his leg thaws and we'll have some cooperation! Once again, I grabbed High Priest Kereth's hand and pulled- and fell forward. Kereth didn't move. Huh?

If I looked back, he was standing tall right where he was, looking straight ahead at Luke.

...wh...?

Luke was also frozen by his unexpected response. High Priest Kereth walked casually from where he was.

“-gh!” Luke reflexively readied the dagger in his right hand. And that moment Kereth grabbed his wrist- and forced the point of the dagger toward his own chest.

“-?!”

We were all frozen still.

“Kill me.” High Priest Kereth said in a cool-headed voice.

“Wha-?!”

“You wanted to kill me, didn’t you?” At those words, bewilderment came to Luke’s face.

“Wh...! You...! You think acting like this will make me-”

“I don’t think that.” Kereth said. “You fought with Miss Lina and Mr. Gourry, who should be your friends, you gave yourself this wound... That’s how much further you would go just to kill me.”

“That’s... true...” Luke said with a bitter expression and a groan.

“Then it’s okay if you kill me.” he said thoughtlessly. “Certainly I am also responsible for your beloved’s death. That’s why... Please kill me. That way, the hate can completely disappear from your heart. Please kill me. Really, then this will all be over.”

The color of hesitation came to Luke’s face.

“Are you... okay with it?”

“I have no reason to be. It’s not that I particularly want to die, it’s just... if I were saved now, your hate wouldn’t vanish, you’d attack me again, you’d continue fighting with Miss Lina, and other people could get involved. But more than all of that, while you’re here in front of me, I’ve had enough of this. That’s all.”

“.....” Luke was silent for a moment. And though we were right beside him, he was completely out of our reach. Right now, Luke was hesitating. If we tactlessly interfered, it could stimulate his hatred. And if that happened, Kereth would surely lose his life. For a moment we were at a standstill. And then, at that time, I realized something.

“This place is-! Do you remember?” At my words, Luke scowled for a moment.

“-!” When he noticed he gasped a little. That’s right. This was... We were in front of the room where Milina breathed her last.

Time froze.

No one moved. Not me. Not Luke. Not Kereth.

And then, I’m not sure if it was after a long time or a short time, but the stillness ended.

“.....gh!” Biting his lip, Luke picked up his sword.

“Haaaahhhhhh...” Someone breathed a deep sigh.

I turned my eyes toward Luke. I tried to say his name. Without a word, Luke passed right by me and Kereth and

went running down the hall.

“Lu-!”

“Please don’t.” As I tried to call after him, High Priest Kereth held me back. “...Just let him go...”

From the back, I watched Luke jump through one of the hall windows, into the dark of night, and disappear.

“The assailant... was hit by one of Miss Lina’s spells and blown apart without a trace... Is something like that okay?” High Priest Kereth said as I watched Luke disappear into the darkness.

Thus, on the surface, this incident was over. The man who had killed two of the high priests was dead. And when High Priest Kereth reported this, no one doubted him. It was still unknown who caused the fire that killed the head priest previously, but more than the related people no longer being here, it was already impossible to verify the real culprit, and so there was an unspoken agreement from practically everyone that, at the end of the day, this was an unsolvable case. Francis and Ryan said they didn’t do it, but I don’t know whether or not they were telling the truth. There’s a chance that Brahn, they first to die, did it but... At any rate, there was no way to make sure. Some thought it was suspicious that Kereth was the only one left alive, but since we knew the situation, from our perspective he wasn’t left alive just by chance. Well, for the townspeople, they just

wanted to quickly forget this scandalous event and let the town return to the prosperous tourist city it once was. As for my commission fee, it had already been settled. I didn't accept any. This time around... in the end, I couldn't do anything... And so, today arrived before preparations could be made for the meeting to determine the next head priest. Two days had passed since the incident. Rushing things along, the chief counselor of the Sorcerer's Guild and the city's dignitaries made their decision. Of the four high priests, three had passed away and Kereth was the only one left. In that case there was only one answer to who should be the next head priest. That's what you'd probably think. Gathering for the meeting was the chief counselor, about ten of the city dignitaries, and High Priest Kereth. Also, Gourry and I, as related parties to the incident, sat in as observers.

"Well then, we shall later discuss the rebuilding of the burned-down main branch, but first, the one who shall be appointed the next high priest..." Quickly going through the simple greetings, moderated by the chief counselor, they got to the real issue. "Through various misfortunes, of the four high priests selected by the late Head Priest Joshua, it seems there is only one remaining. In that case there is only one answer. I believe High Priest Kereth shall be appointed the next head priest. How's that? Any objections?" He turned his head, surveying the room. But there wasn't anyone there who objected- at least there shouldn't have been.

“I have an objection.”

“...?!” Everyone was shocked when they noticed who had spoken out. The one who said it, was none other than High Priest Kereth himself.

“H-High Priest Kereth...! What do you mean by...?!”

“I... am regrettably inexperienced and powerless. Through this incident I was made to realize what pain is.” In contrast from the impatient chief counselor, he started speaking in a quiet, somehow sad tone. “At the time when Head Priest Joshua died, when I heard the news, I went to the chapel to pray to god.... and a voice came to my ears. The head priest was murdered. A wicked person desires to bring chaos to this city. If you want to protect yourself, you need to gather power. I thought I had received a revelation from god...” I started to feel like I heard that somewhere before. “And then... within the next few days, High Priest Francis began to hire guards. I thought it was just as prophesied, and so, I also hired a number of guards. But... after all that, the situation was made even worse... two of the high priests were murdered by someone I had hired. I can’t say I’m not responsible.”

“But that’s...!”

“That’s-” No matter what the chief counselor said, Kereth interrupted and continued on. “I... couldn’t save the girl who had been afflicted with poison and wished to be saved... And the cost of that was the man I hired, killing two high priests. This was largely caused by my inexperience. The voice I

heard that night wasn't the voice of god, but a voice from within, the voice of my growing suspicions... Until then, I felt like I was a fairly competent priest... But, I myself only turned out this way because of the late Head Priest Joshua's abilities. I, during this one incident, showed my inexperience. And as inexperienced as I am, I cannot serve as a replacement to the deceased Lord Joshua. For that reason- I humbly decline the position of head priest."

At high priest Kereth's proclamation, the meeting room was wrapped in a great tumult.

The sun was leaning to the west, and without waiting much longer, the town was tainted with the color of twilight. After all that, the discussion to decide who would be the next head priest was once again postponed for a later date. Well, that's just how things go. Beginning with the chief counselor and in the minds of the dignitaries, the plan was that they'd decide on High Priest Kereth and then have a discussion on how things would be operating from then on. They probably didn't think they were going to stumble on the first step. With this, the rest of the conversation didn't go so smoothly. Well, whoever was going to be the head priest and however the temple was going to be managed, those were the city's problems now. It is no longer under my supervision. *But.*

There was still just one thing. Before we left this city, there was one thing I wanted to be clear on. And that's why I was

here now with Gourry, at the main branch at the center of the city, where the burned down chapel was. Black stoned stone pillars were supporting the high ceiling of an empty space. There weren't any rows of pews, and practically all of the stained glass had been melted away in the fire so that you could no longer tell what they were depicting. Where the altar should have been was just a black, burned, mass which is where I was crouching.

"Don't you think it's weird, Gourry?" My question echoed through the chapel.

"What is?"

"This incident isn't over just yet. Who killed the head priest in the first place? Everything started here in this main branch."

"Who...? You're asking me...?" Gourry said while scratching his head. Of course I didn't even need to ask him. I didn't pay him any mind and continued.

"Francis of the west temple said that he had heard the voice of god. I thought he was just talking crazy, but then High Priest Ryan of the south said he had been chosen by god. I also thought that was just self-absorbed crap. But today... Kereth said it. He heard the voice of god. Don't you think that's strange?"

"Well... For everyone to say they heard the voice of god... it's definitely not normal but..."

“If it had just been one or two people, you could think that it was just an auditory hallucination caused by the shock of the head priest’s death but... when Kereth turned down the head priest position, it was just too much. Well, maybe if we had met High Priest Brahn of the west, he might’ve said he heard the voice too.” I said as I looked far into the distance. The western sky was peeking in through the burned stained glass. Evening was approaching. “If you think of it like that... wouldn’t it be fitting if they really did hear a voice?”

“Well... I wonder...”

“Look, Gourry. If you heard the voice of someone you really didn’t know coming from somewhere... You would know that the voice was coming from someone, right?”

“I don’t think I’d know something like that.”

“I guess not...”

“What are you trying to say, Lina?”

“Basically–” I said as I raised a finger. “The high priests shouldn’t have heard the voice of god. But, the high priests have always believed in god. When they lost their spiritual support from the head priest and prayed, they heard a voice giving them advice, and they *assumed* it was the voice of god. From the stories, the voice never said itself that it was god. All it said was that the head priest’s death wasn’t an accident, but a murder, and the culprit wanted to throw the city into chaos.”

The one who the priests had been acquainted with was someone who was really good about saying things like this. It wasn't a complete lie, but I can't say it would be easy to figure out what was the exact truth. Saying things so that they would be easily misleading, and guiding people in the wrong direction, that's the kind of guy this is. If this 'voice' belonged to someone like that...

"People, just by hearing it, wouldn't have the power to recognize if it was the voice of god or someone else. And so with this situation and my own experience, I can make some kind of guess. Well, what was this voice really then? The voice knew that the head priest had been killed, but at that point in time the investigation wasn't very thorough and they couldn't say if it was accidental or a murder. If it knew that the death wasn't an accident... it could be an omniscient, omnipotent god, and if not..."

"...I get it..." Gourry finally nodded. "If not, then it was the real killer..."

"That's right." I nodded and looked to the heavens. "Did you hear that?! You can come out now!" My voice echoed through the chapel. "Or are you admitting that you can attack people in their sleep, indoctrinate them with nonsense in their time of confusion, but you don't have the power to fight them directly?" Once the reverberation of my voice disappeared-

"k... k-k-k..... k-k-k-k..." A quiet chuckle replaced the stillness.

Just as I thought... it was here.

Back when Gourry and I first visited the temple, Gourry felt someone's presence and chased after it, but the presence suddenly disappeared. If that wasn't just his imagination, our enemy was...

"You're quite perceptive... It's true I did kill the old man, and for the others, I gave them a little bit of advice..." The voice resounded, but I wasn't sure from where.

I began reciting a spell in my mouth as I looked around the chapel. The open windows. The pillars standing in a row. The remains of the stained glass. The chandelier stained with soot. Lurking behind the blackness of the altar...

"But... that was all I did... After that, everyone else did the rest. They gathered people. They hated. They killed. All I had to do watch from here. ...it was really fun... Normally it's difficult to do for holy men, but the high priests, or whatever you call them, had malice and hatred within their own hearts. Without noticing it, it expanded on its own. And I watched as the city was tainted with anxiety. Day by day, the hatred, the animosity, steadily, steadily..."

You irritating...!

"Elmekia Lance!" I released my spell. I was aiming for the only stained glass that was still intact. Just before the spell hit, the stained glass- no, the thing that took the form of it, melted down, avoided the attack and sunk down to the floor.

"Ohhh... you knew where I was..."

Naturally. The lead frame of the stained glass is weakened by heat. While all of the others had been burned away, this one was the only one still intact, which was extremely unnatural. But I didn't need to explain that. With a small quiver, he took form. His color- it was like he was blotted with all the various colors of the stained glass. He was about two heads taller than Gourry and temporarily taking a human shape, but on his face there were no eyes, ears, a mouth, or a nose. Instead, multiple eyes and mouths opened all over his body. Just as expected. Mazoku.

"Surely... it's just as you say..." I said. "Everything was done by humans. Releasing the darkness they held within their hearts... Since you seem like a pretty low ranking Mazoku, I guess the best you can do is a cheap shot like burning someone to death while they're asleep.

"A human...! Making fun of the great Zenui...?!" Wrath swelled up in the Mazoku's voice. Without worrying about it, I held my right hand out at Gourry.

"Gourry... let me borrow your sword for a second. I'll be enough for this guy."

"Don't be reckless." Gourry said as he drew his sword and handed it over to me.

"I know." I said as I took it.

"Don't make light of me!" Zenui roared as he came toward me. Ready the sword, I began reciting my spell.

“Gah!” Zenui spat a fireball from the mouth on the right side of his chest. But I avoided it by jumping to the side.

Far away, there was the color of bursting flames. Zenui came toward me. Just before he entered sword range, his neck stretched out, looking down on me. *I get it.*

Staying extremely calm I knocked the sword into his feet. Stretching out its neck was just a feint. His feet transformed, the innumerable eyes and mouths stretching towards me. One swing of the Blast Sword cut them away entirely.

“Gyaaugh?!” with an unbecoming scream, Zenui jumped far back.

“Blast Ash!” My spell produced the darkness that appeared behind him.

“Gah!?” The Mazoku’s back was swallowed in darkness. In a panic, he jumped back again. He continued to jump back until he was clinging to the ceiling of the chapel. “Y-You think your sword can reach me now?!” He cried in a triumphant voice. Without paying him any attention, I cast a spell.

Darkness beyond twilight, crimson beyond blood that flows

Buried in the flow of time, in thy great name...

“Die!” transforming into an undecided shape as it crept up to the ceiling, Zenui spat fire from its mouth. But...

Brandishing the blast sword in my hands, the flames that came toward me were split in two, the fragments of which wouldn't reach me, because of the preventive barrier caused by my incantation.

“What?!” Zenui cried out in shock. No matter how many times he shot flames at me, they would meet the same fate as that first attack. And so...

Let the fools who stand before me be destroyed

By the power you and I possess...

I released my completed spell at the ceiling.

“Dragon Slave!”



The red light converged on Zenui as he clung to the ceiling.

“G-!” With only that for a scream, it disappeared.

A giant light pierced the heavens. The attack made a direct hit with the Mazoku and blew the top of the temple clear off. The area around the main temple itself was a pretty wide plot of land. Excluding here, where the explosion was, there probably won’t be much damage.

That was... For the Mazoku that spread the seeds of hate through the city, it wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough for the one that was left at the end. That wasn't enough but... For me, it was excessively frustrating. This... Because of this weakling Mazoku... I turned my back to Gourry. Silently, I wiped my cheek. If I looked up, through the roof, which had been completely blown away, there I could see the sky and the clouds floating above. Before I knew it, the sky was dyed madder red.

North Sellentia City.

We were in a place practically on the outskirts of town, on a slight hill with a nice view. In the gentle light of the sun, the well maintained lawn glistened radiantly. There were no people left around, only white gravestones in rows. The Sellentia City Public Cemetery. In one corner, a girl's name was etched into a small white tombstone. Gourry and I stood before it with flowers in our hands. There were many flowers offered at the grave, the old mixed in with the new. It was obvious who left them. I wondered where he was now. No one knew. Since then, he had disappeared.

"It's all over..." I said as I crouched down in front of the gravestone, offering the flowers from my hands. "We got rid of the bastard who sowed the seed of hatred in this city..."

The wind blew. On the green hill.

“-Hey, Lina?” Gourry asked as if he had just remembered something. “Yesterday, the Mazoku you beat at the temple... It’s a good thing he came out when you provoked him but... what were you gonna do if he didn’t show up?”

“He was going to show up. Absolutely. Well, it was kind of a gamble guessing where in the temple he was though.”

But if there had been a Mazoku in the temple, it would have shown up without fail. That’s what I believe. Because, more than provoking him, what I said back then was like a forced summoning spell for a Mazoku. Since Mazoku can’t challenge humans to battle on the Astral Plane, a human can’t be considered a serious opponent. Or so I heard from an acquaintance. Facing a human seriously is no different from admitting that they’re not even strong enough to take on a human without putting effort into it. For an astral being like a Mazoku, that could weaken it to the point of being fatal. This time I put that to use. *If you don’t show yourself, aren’t you just admitting that you aren’t powerful enough to fight a human?* Having a rough idea that our opponent was Mazoku, I said that to the one that was hiding there somewhere. If he heard that and his only reason for hiding was that he just didn’t want to come out, then he would have to acknowledge that he wasn’t as powerful as a human, weakening him- and in some cases, causing termination. In other words, when he heard me, he had to reveal himself.

“...Is that how it is?”

“That’s how it is.”

Gourry questioned me with a face as if he really didn't know what was going on, and I answered without explaining the details.

"So what's gonna happen with the city's head priest? I really thought Kereth would be fine..."

"Well, he said he didn't want to do it and they can't really force him... They'll probably pull a suitable person from some other town to fill the position. That would be appropriate. *Anyway.* That's a story we are no longer involved in."

"Well, I guess that's true..." Gourry mumbled.

And then, a brief silence fell upon us and the wind blew.

"Well... we should be going..." I said as I stood up, facing the gravestone.

"Where are we going?" Gourry asked.

"Anywhere's fine. We can think about it later. For now let's just get out of this city."

"I guess so..."

And so the two of us turned and walked away. Casually, I started thinking.

He disappeared. Had his heart been saved?

The answer- we didn't know. I shook my head a little without saying anything. The wind rustled the green hill as we left.

Afterword

[this translation follows the Afterword for the 2008 reprint of the novels.]

K: I hate everything about it! For that reason, it's the new edition of Hatred in Sellentia!

L: This became a relatively big turning point in the story, didn't it? While writing the second part, you were really terrible to the fans. You told them you were leaving Zelgadis and Amelia out, but the whole time this was the reason for it.

K: That's how it is. Because of the recovery systems in stories and games, it was difficult to handle.

L: Certainly sometimes in Dragon *** a character gets killed by a villain and you think 'was it wrong to *** here?!'

K: Right, right. In certain fantasy series, friends who have fought together, will die in a sudden event. Until just now in *** you were thinking 'how many times are they going to revive?!'

L: After that it's kind of a production problem. They could dance through the fire of a sub-machine gun, get hit by an explosion from a giant snake, be bitten in the neck by a wolf, but then die by getting stabbed by a little girl trotting back to them with a sword.

K: Ah... That. But if it happens at the end, it's a surprise and you think 'What?! That's how they really die?!'

L: This isn't your favorite game. What about during production and composition, even in this story? For example, if you left Amelia out, it'd probably follow the same storyline, but you'd have to explain extra things and make rearrangements and it would make it seem slower. In the end, you can't leave her out.

K: Right. But this time around when I was proofreading for the new edition, I didn't feel as swept up in my emotions as I did when I was writing it. Yeah, sometimes I think it's weird that I lose my composure like this.

L: If that's how you feel, why don't you just rewrite it?

K: There was a time when I wanted to do that for myself. When it was first decided that there was going to be a reprint, the editor said even though it had all been proofread, he would pardon a major revision. Proofreading it, I finally understood the reason behind sacrificial animals. When I wanted to rewrite it, I was doing it at a mad pace. It was fine to just do it self-indulgently, but when I got to actually rewrite it, tampering with it would change the way the story unfolded. It would lose its balance and I would overwork it until it lost its shape. On top of that, revising it was making my confidence go around in circles!

L: Be proooooouud! Throw away that kind of confidence! But if you did just plunge in and change things without caring it wouldn't be good for the story. What if back at volume eight, I took control of the main character and then just did whatever I wanted? I would travel across the

kingdoms meeting with Mazoku and then 15 minutes before the show ends, I'd say 'don't watch this madness!' and fill the area with nothingness.

K: You're following the route of Mito Koumon*?! If that happened there wouldn't be any good or bad people left!

L: There wouldn't be any people, so there wouldn't be any trouble. In other words, true peace!

K: That's wrong! There isn't a single person who actually thinks that would be peace. That would just be nothing!

L: Huh? But wouldn't it all be in vain if you punished an evil magistrate and then some years later another evil magistrate took his place?

K: ...well, I think that's true but... But you're saying you want everyone to disappear. Are supposed to be some kind of final boss?

L: no I think I could be compared to one but...

K: Hah! You forgot but as soon as I mentioned it-!

L: Forgot...? Oho~ You are vastly underestimating me. I *fully* remember. It just happened to come up in conversation.

K: (Guarding himself) Wh-What? You aren't thinking about attacking me, are you...?

L: Hey, since this is the afterword, can't I occasionally obliterate the author?

K: It bothers me that you're actually asking permission... well, fine.

L: But you'll have revived by the next afterword, as if nothing ever happened. It's just like main characters in games who revive infinitely.

K: Yeah, but without any memories that the Kings or priests would find fault with. Why is it like that the next time they revive...? Don't things like that happen in their world?

L: I've had enough of your abstract popular opinions! ...er, well, that might be true but... Well, anyway. This was the afterword.

K: What's with that spear?! ...uh, well then everyone, until next time.